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## Dealing with Dual Differences: Social Coping Strategies of Gifted and Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer Adolescents

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DEALING WITH DUAL DIFFERENCES: SOCIAL COPING STRATEGIES OF  
GIFTED AND LESBIAN, GAY, BISEXUAL, TRANSGENDER, AND QUEER  
ADOLESCENTS

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A Master's Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the School of Education

The College of William & Mary in Virginia

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In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts in Education, Gifted

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by

Virginia Helen Hutcheson

May 2012

# SOCIAL COPING OF GIFTED AND LGBTQ ADOLESCENTS

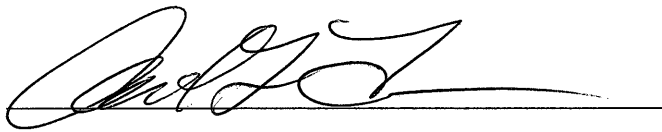
## DEALING WITH DUAL DIFFERENCES: SOCIAL COPING STRATEGIES OF GIFTED AND LESBIAN, GAY, BISEXUAL, TRANSGENDER, AND QUEER ADOLESCENTS

by

Virginia Helen Hutcheson

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Approved May 2012 by

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Carol L. Tieso', written over a horizontal line.

Carol L. Tieso, Ph.D.

Chairperson of Master's Committee

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Janice Robbins, Ph.D.

# SOCIAL COPING OF GIFTED AND LGBTQ ADOLESCENTS

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# SOCIAL COPING OF GIFTED AND LGBTQ ADOLESCENTS

## DEALING WITH DUAL DIFFERENCES: SOCIAL COPING STRATEGIES OF GIFTED AND LESBIAN, GAY, BISEXUAL, TRANSGENDER, AND QUEER ADOLESCENTS

### ABSTRACT

The purpose of this qualitative study was to investigate the social coping strategies of gifted and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) students in middle school and high school. Previous literature has explored hostile school environments for LGBTQ students and negative social perceptions of giftedness, but little research has addressed students who are both gifted and LGBTQ.

Twelve LGBTQ college students from a highly selective Southeastern university were interviewed and asked to retrospectively describe their experiences, feelings, and behaviors in middle school and high school. As adolescents who were twice-different from their peers for being both gifted and LGBTQ, participants felt isolated and stigmatized. Their most common coping strategies included finding supportive groups of friends; hiding or downplaying their LGBTQ identity; participating in extracurricular activities; confiding in supportive teachers; developing their writing, musical, and leadership talents to compensate for and express their feelings of difference; and conducting research to understand and develop their identity. Participants reported that their giftedness motivated them to seek and create safe spaces to cope with their LGBTQ identity. The implications of this study can help educators guide students in the use of positive coping strategies that facilitate both talent and identity development.

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

This study retrospectively investigated the social coping strategies of gifted and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer middle school and high school students. Through semi-structured interviews, the researcher gained insight into the strategies that students use to cope with feeling different from their peers in two distinct areas of identity.

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) middle school and high school students often struggle to come to terms with their sexual and gender identities in toxic school environments. They are teased, alienated, or worse; indeed, 84.6% of students in a nationwide sample of LGBTQ students were verbally harassed at school due to their sexual orientation (Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network [GLSEN], 2009). These students must find ways to cope with their social differentness.

Gifted students also face feelings of differentness from their peers. Gifted individuals may experience “difficulty in creating and maintaining social relationships” (Plucker & Levy, 2001, p. 75). Cross, Coleman, and Stewart (1993) found that gifted students believe that other students, teachers, and even friends see them as different.

### **Statement of Problem/Need**

Students who are both gifted and LGBTQ are socially different from their peers in multiple ways. Past research has examined typical school environments for LGBTQ students and the social coping strategies used by gifted students, but no research has investigated the way that doubly different, gifted *and* LGBTQ students have coped with their social differences. This study is designed to retroactively investigate the social coping strategies used by gifted and LGBTQ adolescents during middle and high school.

**Brief Review of Relevant Literature**

**School environment for LGBTQ students.** Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) middle school and high school students face social alienation, isolation, and derogation. They “are at high risk for a number of health problems, including suicide ideation and attempts, harassment, substance abuse, homelessness, and declining school performance” (Mufioz-Plaza, Quinn, & Rounds, 2002, p. 52). Students find social reprieve by seeking support from adults, confiding in other LGBTQ students (Mufioz-Plaza et al., 2002), starting or joining Gay-Straight Alliances (Mayberry, Chenneville, & Currie, 2011), and working for social change within and outside of school (Blackburn, 2004).

Other LGBTQ students may instead shy “away from other people who were identified or perceived as LGBT or [go] along with anti-homosexual remarks to avoid disclosure.” (Mufioz-Plaza et al., 2002, p. 58). Remaining “in the closet” (denying their sexual orientation or gender identity to themselves and/or others) is one common strategy that LGBTQ students use to cope with the emotional and physical stress caused by their social differentness. Some students may resort to even more negative coping strategies such as underachieving in school, skipping class, or turning to drug use (Peterson & Rischar, 2000).

**Gifted social coping strategies.** Gifted students also face real or perceived social stigmatization because they are different from their average-intelligence peers (Berlin, 2009). Cross et al. (1993) found that many gifted students studied reported controlling social information available to their peers by self-censoring comments about their

giftedness that would have drawn attention to their intelligence or separated them from others.

Some students cope with their feelings of difference by standing out from their peers and being very visible, while try to deny their giftedness altogether (Cross, 1997). Others use a variety of strategies to try to blend in with their non-gifted peers. These include changing their behavior, underachieving, and attempting suicide, but also positive methods like getting involved in extracurricular activities (Cross, 1997).

### **Purpose of the Study**

This study investigated the extent to which gifted *and* LGBTQ students use social coping strategies analogous to previously researched coping strategies. By interviewing students who identify as LGBTQ *and* who are gifted, the study explored potential interactions between giftedness and LGBTQ identity. Blackburn and McCready (2009) studied poor, urban, LGBTQ students of color and found that they experienced their multiple social identities simultaneously. They argue that “to work effectively with queer youth in urban communities, one has to embrace the complexities of their multiple identities and develop the capacity to understand the intersections among them” (Blackburn & McCready, 2009, p. 228). This study sought to investigate similar intersections in the ways that students cope with their differences resulting from their multiple identities as gifted and LGBTQ adolescents.

This study is important because it addresses important implications for the social and emotional development of a specific subset of gifted adolescents. Educators of the gifted have committed to nurturing the affective and social needs of their students

(National Association for Gifted Children [NAGC], 2010) in addition to developing their academic potential.

### **Research Questions**

This study qualitatively investigated the social coping strategies used by gifted and LGBTQ adolescents. The research was designed to answer the following questions: What social coping strategies are used by gifted and LGBTQ adolescents? How often is each strategy used? How do intersections between giftedness and LGBTQ identity impact social coping? How can teachers and schools support and facilitate gifted and LGBTQ students' identity and talent development?

### **Limitations and Delimitations**

**Limitations.** A study's limitations are its potential weaknesses, those factors that affect its internal and external validity (Cresswell, 1994). This study's primary limitation was its narrowly defined sample. Because the sample was purposive, chosen for specific criteria rather than for representativeness, the study's results are not easily generalized to other populations (Patton, 2001).

Sampling bias occurred because the researcher could only access participants who were out of the closet and who chose to affiliate themselves with the campus LGBTQ organization. Researchers cannot investigate the feelings or social coping strategies of students who are not out of the closet. Mayo (2007) notes that this limitation is inherent in studying LGBTQ populations and suggests that research participants' "very outness makes them a specific subset" of the population being studied (p. 82). Furthermore, students who attend the university's LGBTQ student group may not be representative of

all LGBTQ students in terms of age, race, gender, political affiliation, or other differences.

Additionally, not all gifted students choose to attend college. This sample excluded gifted individuals who did not choose to attend college or who selected different types of post-secondary education due to underachievement, socioeconomic status, or other internal or social factors. Such bias was especially relevant in this study because many LGBTQ students are financially cut off from their families or left homeless (Ray, 2006), which impairs their ability to attend college despite their giftedness.

The sample also suffers from self-selection bias. The group of students who chose to respond to the request for interviews was comfortable enough to discuss their sexual orientations and gender identities in a research context. These individuals may have had different experiences or used different coping mechanisms than those who chose not to participate in the study.

**Delimitations.** Delimitations are boundaries set by the researcher to narrow the scope of the study (Cresswell, 1994). The primary delimitation in this study was the age of its participants. Directly studying the experiences of middle school and high school LGBTQ youth is difficult because of the social stigma associated with non-normative sexual orientations and gender identities (Donelson & Rogers, 2004). Fewer younger students are out of the closet in secondary school than in college. Even those students who are out to their peers in high school are often not out to their parents, so obtaining parental consent for minors to participate in the research study would not have been feasible (Cohn, 2002). Staying “in the closet” is an important potential coping mechanism

for LGBTQ students, so conducting a study of this nature without including closeted students would have been meaningless. Asking college students to reflect on their experiences was the best way to obtain a sample that included students who were out to peers as well as those who were closeted in high school.

Therefore, the researcher chose to study adult participants, ages 18-22. Because older participants had to reflect on their experiences in middle and high school, their responses may not have accurately portrayed the social coping strategies they actually used as adolescents. Participants may have misremembered their experiences, or they may have unintentionally projected more recent feelings and behaviors onto their adolescent selves. To attempt to address this delimitation, participants were asked to consider how their feelings and coping strategies changed in college.

Another delimitation was the researcher's operational definition of giftedness. By considering students at a highly selective college to be "gifted" for the purpose of the study, the sample could have inadvertently included participants who were not identified as gifted in middle school or high school.

Finally, the researcher chose to conduct in-depth interviews of few participants, sacrificing breadth for depth. This small sample size ( $N = 12$ ) limited the extent to which the research findings could be generalized, but it allowed the researcher to investigate participants' experiences more holistically.

### **Researcher's Perspective**

The researcher is a gifted and lesbian-identified graduate student who was an undergraduate at the university from which the sample was drawn. As an undergraduate, she actively participated in the LGBTQ student organization from which she recruited

participants. Therefore, the researcher knew and had developed rapport with many, but not all, of the participants outside the research context.

Although this position introduced bias into the research, Bogdan and Biklen (2003) note that neutrality is both impossible and undesirable in qualitative research. Researchers who are similar in age and share some characteristics find it easier to build rapport with students. In this situation, because sexual orientation and gender identity are sensitive subjects, participants may have been more willing to open up to the researcher and to consider her trustworthy and empathetic because she is not heterosexual (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). Furthermore, her position as a gifted and LGBTQ student meant that she understood and shared her participants' cultural contexts and definitions (Rubin & Rubin, 1995), which facilitated communication.

### **Definitions of Terms**

#### **Gifted/social coping terminology.**

Gifted—gifted students are those who “demonstrate outstanding levels of aptitude... or competence... in one or more domains” (NAGC, n.d. b, p. 1). In this study, participants were defined as “gifted” if they attend a highly selective college, whether or not they were formally identified as gifted as K-12 students

Social coping—changes in thoughts and behavior that serve to reduce the social stigma of giftedness (Cross & Swiatek, 2009)

#### **LGBTQ terminology.**

Bisexual—a person who is sexually, emotionally, and/or romantically attracted to both men and women, though not necessarily simultaneously (Human Rights Campaign [HRC], 2012)

Cisgender—non-transgender; describes individuals who have a match between the gender they were assigned at birth, their bodies, and their personal identity (Schilt & Westbrook, 2009)

Gay—a man who is sexually, emotionally, and/or romantically attracted to other men; may also be used to describe a man or woman who is attracted to members of the same sex (HRC, 2012)

Gender expression—how one represents or expresses one’s gender identity to others, often through behavior, clothing, hairstyles, voice or body characteristics (National Center for Transgender Equality [NCTE], 2009)

Gender identity—an individual’s internal sense of being male, female, or something else; because gender identity is internal, one’s gender identity is not necessarily visible to others (NCTE, 2009)

Heterosexual—a person who is sexually, emotionally, and/or romantically attracted to a sex other than their own (Gender Equity Resource Center, n.d.)

Heteronormativity—the suite of cultural, legal, and institutional practices that maintain normative assumptions that there are two and only two genders, that gender reflects biological sex, and that only sexual attraction between these “opposite” genders is natural or acceptable (Schilt & Westbrook, 2009)

Homophobia—the fear and hatred of, or discomfort with, people who love and are sexually attracted to members of the same sex (HRC, 2012)

Homosexual—a person who is sexually, emotionally, and/or romantically attracted to the same sex (Gender Equity Resource Center, n.d.)

Lesbian—a woman who is sexually, emotionally, and/or romantically attracted to other



women (HRC, 2012)

LGBTQ—an acronym for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and/or questioning (HRC, 2012)

Queer—often used interchangeably with “LGBT;” the term may have negative or derogatory connotations for some people, but many younger people are comfortable using it. Within the scope of queer theory, it is used to question normative power structures surrounding sexuality, gender, and other subjugations (HRC, 2012; Mayo, 2007)

Sexual orientation—an enduring pattern of emotional, romantic, and/or sexual attractions to men, women, or both; also refers to a person’s sense of identity based on those attractions, related behaviors, and membership in a community of others who share those attractions (American Psychological Association [APA], 2008)

Straight—a person who is sexually, emotionally, and/or romantically attracted to a sex other than their own (Gender Equity Resource Center, n.d.)

Transgender—a broad umbrella term describing people whose gender identity, expression, and/or behavior is different from those typically associated with their assigned sex at birth (NCTE, 2009)

Transphobia—the fear and hatred of, or discomfort with, people whose gender identity or gender expression do not conform to cultural gender norms (HRC, 2012)

## **Chapter 2: Review of Related Literature**

In our current political climate, controversies about lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) issues in public schools have resulted in national attention. In 2008, California's vote on whether to ban same-sex marriage sparked widespread debates about whether schools can or should teach tolerance for same-sex couples (Charles, 2008). More recently, a string of suicides by "young gay teenagers who had been harassed by classmates" (McKinley, 2010, para. 4) resulted in anti-bullying measures and discussions about the school climates endured by LGBTQ students. However, most conversations have lacked empirical grounding.

What actually characterizes school experiences for LGBTQ adolescents and what measures do students take to cope? This review of the literature will explore current research about LGBTQ students' coping and compare it to research on the coping strategies that gifted students use to manage social situations in school. Because being LGBTQ and being gifted are both, to different degrees, socially stigmatized identities, both populations of students take similar steps to control how they are perceived socially. Finally, this review will highlight the few studies that have investigated the experiences of students who are both gifted and LGBTQ.

### **Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer (LGBTQ) Students**

In this paper, LGBTQ refers to all students who self-identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, or any other significantly non-heterosexual orientation or non-normative gender identity. This inclusive term is comprehensive enough to refer to most populations which have been studied in an educational context, but not so broad as to suggest a false degree of representation for groups not discussed. However, to maintain

the integrity of other research, each author's preferred term (e.g., GLBT, LGBT, LGB) will be used when describing past research. Many studies have explored lesbian, gay, and bisexual students without considering transgender individuals, and it would be inaccurate to refer to these studies with the more inclusive term "LGBTQ."

**School environment for LGBTQ students.** Much information about the current school environment for LGBTQ students came from the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) National School Climate Survey (2010), a biennial survey of more than 7,000 LGBT secondary school students from all 50 states.

**Harassment.** Discrimination, harassment, and negative stereotyping are a part of everyday life for most LGBT students. "Numerous surveys indicate that verbal harassment and abuse are nearly universal experiences among lesbian, gay, and bisexual people" (APA, 2008). In the GLSEN survey (2010), 88.9% of secondary students reported hearing "gay" used in a negative context frequently or often, and most experienced distress when they heard it. Almost two thirds (61.1%) of LGBT students "felt unsafe at school because of their sexual orientation and 39.9% [felt unsafe] because of how they expressed their gender" (GLSEN, 2010, p. 3). Most students (84.6%) have been verbally harassed for their sexual orientation; 40.1% have been physically harassed, and 18.8% have been physically assaulted (e.g., punched, kicked, or injured with a weapon) (GLSEN, 2010). More than half (52.9%) of LGBT students reported some form of cyberbullying (e.g., harassment or threats via text messaging or social networking sites) based on their sexual orientation (GLSEN, 2010). The statistics are similar but lower for students who have been harassed or assaulted for their gender expression.

Perhaps more importantly, most students (62.4%) did not feel comfortable enough to report instances of harassment or assault to school staff (GLSEN, 2010). Students did not report instances of harassment because they doubted that staff would respond appropriately, worried that reporting would exacerbate the situation, or feared that the staff would make fun of them as well (Kosciw, Greytak, Diaz, & Bartkiewicz, 2010). Indeed, one-third of those students who did report instances of harassment or assault felt that staff members did not respond appropriately or administer repercussions (GLSEN, 2010). When LGBTQ students see teachers responding to racist remarks but not to homophobic or transphobic ones, their feelings of isolation are magnified (Stewart, 2006).

These survey results were generalized across lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer respondents. However, it is important to note that bisexual individuals may face even more stereotyping and harassment than others because straight, lesbian, and gay people all hold negative stereotypes about this group (APA, 2008). Transgender people face even more extreme prejudice and discrimination in nearly every aspect of their lives and are the frequent target of hate crimes, especially if they are also members of a minority race or ethnicity (APA, 2011).

***Heterosexism.*** Many stereotypes about lesbian, gay, and bisexual people are based in gender expression rather than actual sexual orientation. Because sexual orientation is not outwardly visible, would-be harassers have only a person's gender presentation on which to judge them (Wilkinson & Pearson, 2009). Even before young children know what such words imply, children taunt any boys who act non-masculine with insults like "gay" and "sissy" (Kerr & Cohn, 2001), which serves to "marginalize

and stigmatize same-sex sexual desire” later on (Wilkinson & Pearson, 2009, p. 544).

The supremacy of heterosexuality in schools and in society is strictly maintained by the derogation of all non-normative gender expressions (Schilt & Westbrook, 2009).

A social situation is considered heterosexist when “power is allocated via positioning in gender and sexual hierarchies” (Schilt & Westbrook, 2009, p. 443). In our society, heterosexuality is clearly privileged above homosexuality, just as men have more power than women. School institutions like football and prom legitimize and promote masculinity and heterosexuality. Such practices stigmatize LGBTQ students, who are left without role models for embodying their own non-normative identities (Wilkinson & Pearson, 2009). Heterosexist school climates are uncomfortable for many LGBTQ students, especially for boys, who must police their clothing, behaviors, and mannerisms to conform to others’ expectations (Kerr & Cohn, 2001).

***Recent changes in school climate.*** In the past decade, the school environment for LGBTQ students has become more positive overall (GLSEN, 2010). Students hear fewer homophobic epithets and have access to more LGBT-related library resources, while Gay-Straight Alliances and supportive educators are more common (GLSEN, 2010).

However, the frequency of bullying and harassment has remained constant over the last ten years, and there has been no change in the number of schools and states with comprehensive non-discrimination policies (GLSEN, 2010). These statistics are not meant to belabor the point, but rather to emphasize the severity of the educational situation that LGBTQ students live through daily and to provide an impetus for research to alleviate these students’ situations.

**Effects of hostile school environments.** Prejudice and discrimination have effects both socially and at the individual level. Socially, they perpetuate stereotypes, which are then used to rationalize the unequal treatment of subsets of the population (APA, 2008). Individually, prejudice, discrimination, and harassment have negative psychological and academic repercussions.

**Psychological effects.** The harassment and victimization that LGBT students experience in schools is positively correlated with higher incidences of depression and anxiety and negatively correlated with self-esteem (GLSEN, 2010). LGBTQ students are at a higher risk than other students for suicidal ideation and attempts (APA, 2008; Mufioz-Plaza et al., 2002). These students are also more likely to engage in risky behaviors like substance abuse and unprotected sex (APA, 2008; Mufioz-Plaza et al., 2002).

**Achievement effects.** Research has suggested that LGBTQ youth are also at risk for declining school performance (Blackburn & McCreedy, 2009; Mufioz-Plaza et al., 2002). Students who were harassed more frequently because of their sexual orientation or gender expression reported lower grade point averages by almost half a grade than students who were less frequently harassed (GLSEN, 2010). Almost 10% of LGBT students reported that they did not intend to pursue post-secondary education after high school, compared to only 6.6% of the general population (GLSEN, 2010). This, too, was mediated by the frequency with which students reported being harassed: 14% of those who experienced high levels of victimization did not plan to continue their post-secondary education, compared to 9% of students who were harassed less frequently (GLSEN, 2010).

Being LGBTQ is also associated with absenteeism. Almost a third (30%) of LGBT students missed one day of school in the month prior to the survey administration because they felt unsafe or uncomfortable, and 5.4% missed six or more days (GLSEN, 2010). Such absenteeism is four times more likely for LGBTQ students than for the general population (GLSEN, 2010). “School-based victimization denies these students their right to an education” (GLSEN, 2010, p. 4).

It is important to note that none of these negative outcomes are inherently related to or resultant from being lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer. The American Psychological Association (2008) has long held that no sexual orientation can be classified as a mental health disorder, and asserts that being transgender can only be considered a mental disorder “if it causes significant distress or disability” (APA, 2011, p. 3). Such a diagnosis may actually be distressing in and of itself, creating or exacerbating psychological issues (Smith & Leaper, 2005). On the contrary, many LGBTQ students and adults live physically and mentally healthy lives. Rather, it is the common experiences of prejudice, discrimination, and harassment that LGBTQ people so often face which are associated with the negative outcomes and mental health risks described above (APA, 2008).

**Factors that make schools less hostile for LGBTQ students.** Many LGBTQ students face hostile school environments and must deal with the associated negative effects. However, these effects are not unmitigated. For example, research by Wilkinson and Pearson (2009) has suggested that LGBTQ students are more stigmatized, and therefore have lower social, emotional, and academic success, in high schools that privilege heterosexuality and masculinity by emphasizing football or religion. Similarly,

LGBTQ students are more affected by depression and low self-esteem in rural areas, where they feel more isolation, than in urban areas (Wilkinson & Pearson, 2009). The level of discrimination faced by LGBTQ students is also affected by socioeconomic status and religion (Stewart, 2006). Schools cannot control these factors in order to become more welcoming for LGBTQ students, but there are other moderating factors that schools can implement or foster which make schools less hostile.

***Comprehensive non-discrimination policies.*** The most straightforward way to make schools safer for LGBTQ students is to legislate or mandate non-discrimination and anti-bullying policies that include protections for students based on sexual orientation and gender identity. Comprehensive policies that specifically include these categories among other protected classes are the most effective, although any non-discrimination policy is better than none (GLSEN, 2010). Such policies are associated with the use of fewer homophobic comments and more positive staff intervention in bias and harassment situations (GLSEN, 2010). However, only 15 states plus the District of Columbia currently have comprehensive non-discrimination laws, and only about 18% of students report such comprehensive policies in their schools (GLSEN, 2010).

***Gay-Straight Alliances.*** The first Gay-Straight Alliances (GSAs) were formed in 1984 to provide small-group counseling and support for underserved gay and lesbian students (Uribe, 1993) and to help sensitize staff to the needs of gay students (Friedman-Nimz et al., 2006). In recent decades, more and more schools have formed GSAs or similar student organizations to serve as support networks for LGBT students. Currently, there are more than 3,000 high schools with GSAs (Mayberry et al., 2011), but only about 45% of secondary students attend schools with GSAs (GLSEN, 2010).



GSAs effect positive changes in schools: students from schools with GSAs report hearing homophobic remarks, feeling unsafe, being victimized, and missing school less frequently than students from schools with no GSA (GLSEN, 2010). Staff in these schools intervene in harassment and bullying situations more frequently and effectively (GLSEN, 2010), and the existence of GSAs facilitate the visibility of adult allies (Mayberry et al., 2011). Moreover, “students with a GSA [have] a greater sense of connectedness to their school community than students without a GSA” (GLSEN, 2010, p. 11). LGBTQ students with GSAs “experience less social isolation, increased self-esteem, gains in academic achievement, feelings of relational empowerment, and a heightened political consciousness” (Mayberry et al., 2011, p. 3). GSAs are also associated with a decrease in suicidality and risky health behaviors and an increase in healthy sexual identity formation (Mayberry et al., 2011).

However, there is some concern that schools are using GSAs as a crutch instead of working to implement more systemic school change (Mayberry et al., 2011). Some researchers argue that GSAs which overemphasize “safe” spaces actually promote silence and invisibility for LGBTQ students by encouraging students and staff to limit their conversations about sexuality and diversity to that space; meanwhile, heterosexual students are never forced to confront their own privilege (Mayberry et al., 2011; Schilt & Westbrook, 2009). Therefore, it is important to continue to foster GSAs but also to look beyond these organizations for more comprehensive school-wide and district-wide solutions.

***Inclusive curriculum.*** Another strategy that has been shown to make schools more welcoming for LGBTQ students is the use of inclusive curriculum, which gives

students accurate and positive representations of LGBTQ people and their contributions in history and literature. Such curriculum “helps promote respect for all and can improve an individual LGBT student’s school experiences” (GLSEN, 2010, p. 12). Inclusive curriculum can also encourage or require teachers to take advantage of “teachable moments” about sexual orientation and gender identity, such as when students inadvertently or intentionally make heterosexist or homophobic comments, by modeling respectful understanding (Mayberry et al., 2011).

The inclusion of such curricular representations is associated with fewer instances of homophobic remarks, fewer students (42.1% compared to 63.6% in schools without inclusive curriculum) who report feeling unsafe, and fewer students (17.1% versus 31.6% in schools without inclusive curriculum) who miss school because of feeling unsafe or uncomfortable (GLSEN, 2010). Furthermore, students at these schools are more likely to report that their peers are somewhat or very accepting (GLSEN, 2010). Despite these clear positive outcomes, only about 13% of students attend schools that use inclusive curriculum. Indeed, measures to mandate or recommend the inclusion of LGBTQ individuals in school curriculum have been met with contentious debate and opposition (e.g., Charles, 2008; Lovett, 2011).

***Support from educators.*** Another positive factor for LGBTQ students is the presence of supportive staff. This support is harder to mandate or to quantify, but the GLSEN National School Climate Survey (2010) studied its positive effects using students’ self-reports of the number of school staff members they felt were “supportive.” At schools with greater than six supportive staff members, only about half of the LGBT students surveyed felt unsafe, compared to almost three fourths of the LGBT students at

schools with no supportive staff members (GLSEN, 2010). Schools with supportive educators are associated with a greater sense of school community overall and higher average GPAs and fewer missed school days for LGBT students (GLSEN, 2010).

“Students with many supportive educators were half as likely to say they were not planning on attending college compared to students with no supportive educators” (GLSEN, 2010, p. 15). Most students (94.5%) were able to identify at least one supportive staff member in their school, but only about half could identify six or more (GLSEN, 2010). It is important that staff members support LGBTQ students and rights in all situations, not just to those students they know to be LGBTQ, because most students do not identify themselves as LGBTQ to their teachers (GLSEN, 2010; Stewart, 2006).

***Bibliotherapy.*** Developmental bibliotherapy, the use of directed readings to anticipate and meet social and emotional needs (Halsted, 2009), can be used to create a more supportive school climate by making homosexuality and transgender identities seem normal. Educators can help by increasing the number of books available and by recommending them to students in non-threatening ways (Vare & Norton, 2004). Even young students need appropriately multicultural and LGBTQ-themed books to broaden their experiences and to prevent stereotypes from developing (Swartz, 2003).

“Appropriate books may promote healthy exploration... and help them feel that their identities are affirmed rather than silenced” (Vare & Norton, 2004, p. 193).

All of these factors are positively associated with LGBTQ students’ mental and social health, development, and academic achievement. However, these support structures are largely top-down, imposed on the students by administrators who are subject to backlash from parents and politicians (Mayberry et al., 2011). Adults who

provide safe spaces for students are to be lauded, but educators also need to work to develop students' own agency and ability to work for change (Blackburn, 2004). To facilitate such growth, researchers should explore the strategies that students can use on an individual level to cope with hostile school environments.

**Coping strategies.** Compared to the above research on institutional factors which make schools less hostile, there is a dearth of research on the individual strategies that LGBTQ students can use to mitigate school and promote social and emotional development.

Students have different reactions when they first begin to realize that they may be LGBTQ. All adolescents form their sexual identities developmentally, but the process is very different for LGBTQ students than for heterosexual, cisgender students. Attraction to the same and/or other gender begins to form between middle childhood and early adolescence (APA, 2008), and most LGBTQ individuals realize their sexual "otherness" at this time (Stewart, 2006). As children and adolescents begin to recognize their attractions, they also recognize the social stigma associated with their non-normative sexual orientation or gender identity. LGBTQ individuals then usually try to deny or resist their sexual identity before accepting it and then disclosing it to others (Stewart, 2006). Finally, they are able to integrate their sexual identity into their whole selves.

LGBTQ adolescents proceed through these stages at very different speeds. Some students manage to fully integrate their sexual identity at a young age and go through the developmental process of exploring relationships and intimacy (Stewart, 2006) at the same ages as their heterosexual peers. However, most LGBTQ teens take more time, and

at each developmental stage, they must cope with their feelings of difference and social stigma (Stewart, 2006).

Stewart (2006) argues that students use three ways to manage these feelings of difference: they try to change them, continue to hide them, or accept them. However, most research shows no difference in manifested behavior between adolescents who are trying to change their feelings and those who are continuing to hide them. Furthermore, research suggests a third category of coping strategies that could be characterized as avoiding or minimizing negative feelings and social differences.

*Trying to change or hide feelings.* Some students recognize their own LGBTQ identity but choose to hide it from others (stay “in the closet”). Staying in the closet can have particularly negative effects on health and well-being (APA, 2008). LGBTQ students may internalize negative stereotypes and alter their personality to try to avoid fulfilling them, which can cause psychological harm (Kumashiro, 2000). Stewart (2006) calls such efforts “defensive masquerading” and argues that it is emotionally and mentally draining. He asserts that if schools were safer and more inclusive, “students, who previously focused their energy on defensive masquerades, could redirect their efforts toward healthy cognitive and psychosocial development” (p. 208).

Other students might try to alter their gender presentation and expression by wearing similar clothing to their straight friends and by not emphasizing their sexual orientation in conversations (McCready, 2004). Some avoid peers who are known or perceived as LGBTQ in order to dissociate from their own identity, and others use or support the use of anti-gay jokes and remarks to try to blend in (Mufioz-Plaza et al., 2002).

*Accepting negative feelings.* Some students try to come to terms with their sexual orientation or gender identity openly. “Coming out of the closet” is a way of publicly declaring oneself as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer, whether it is by disclosing to a few individuals or fully identifying with an LGBTQ community (APA, 2008). This is a common way that students choose to deal with their feelings of difference. “Research has shown that feeling positively about one’s sexual orientation and integrating it into one’s life fosters greater well-being and mental health” (APA, 2008, p. 3).

LGBTQ students must come out before they can explore and develop their sexual identities (Stewart, 2006). Coming out also allows students to seek out others like them and helps students to see that they do not exist in isolation, which is beneficial for mental health (APA, 2008). Being open about sexual orientation or gender identity is associated with higher self-esteem, lower levels of depression, and “greater attachment to school” (Kosciw et al., 2010, p. 50). Some students consciously choose to come out as a strategy for social change, knowing that they must be out to combat stigma (Blackburn, 2004). However, being out is also associated with greater victimization because bullies are better able to target LGBTQ students who are out (Kosciw et al., 2010).

Being out is increasingly common in middle school and high school, and students are beginning to come out at younger and younger ages (Denizet-Lewis, 2009). Among secondary students who recognize their own identity and label themselves as LGBT, 67% are out to all or most of their peers at school, and 40% are out to all or most staff members (Kosciw et al., 2010).

Another way that LGBTQ students can accept their feelings of difference is by finding older LGBTQ students or adults to serve as role models and confidants (Mufioz-Plaza et al., 2002). Social support is crucial for dealing with stress, but being LGBTQ may make it difficult for students to find social support outside networks of other LGBTQ individuals (APA, 2008). Attending a school's GSA is one way of coping by finding like-minded social support. Other students might try to find social support through family and non-LGBTQ friends.

***Minimizing or avoiding negative feelings.*** Positive strategies for minimizing or avoiding the negative feelings surrounding LGBTQ identity include working for social change and focusing on strengths. Students may become activists within or outside of their schools and communities (Blackburn, 2004). Others emphasize particular skills and try to achieve in those areas to compensate for and take the attention away from the social “weakness” of being LGBTQ (McCready, 2004).

Other students use more negative strategies to avoid their hostile school environments. Some students may skip or drop out of school to avoid harassment (Blackburn, 2004; Blackburn & McCready, 2009; Stewart, 2006). Others turn to high-risk behaviors such as substance abuse, self-mutilation, eating disorders, prostitution, or running away, all in an effort to avoid harassment and feelings of social stigma (Kumashiro, 2000; Stewart, 2006). Some students become so depressed that they try to kill themselves (Kumashiro, 2000; Stewart, 2006). Some simply put up with teasing and even physical harassment from peers in order to fit in because it can counteract “possible marginalization brought on by openly identifying as gay” (McCready, 2004, p. 140).

LGBTQ students who are constantly harassed in school come to associate school with suffering (Stewart, 2006). This may lead students to curtail their educational aspirations or stop achieving to their full potential. In particular, gay boys may purposely underachieve as a way of reinforcing their perceived masculinity because boys who are overly smart are not seen as manly (Stewart, 2006).

Still other students over-involve themselves in aspects of school life. These students try to compensate for being LGBTQ by hyper-performing in academic, athletic, or extracurricular areas (Kumashiro, 2000). Such activities give them an increased feeling of control (McCready, 2004). Such perfectionistic tendencies can be adaptive for students, but they can also lead to inordinate psychological stress.

Because school and social environments are overtly hostile toward non-normative identities, LGBTQ students must use all of these coping strategies to mediate potentially stressful social situations. To a lesser extent, all social minority groups utilize such social coping mechanisms.

### **Gifted Students**

A considerable body of research suggests that gifted students, like LGBTQ students, feel socially different than their peers, which can have negative social, emotional, psychological, and academic effects. It is important to recognize that the stigmas and stereotypes that gifted students face are mixed and far less overwhelmingly hostile than those that LGBTQ students encounter. However, the parallels are worth considering. To any degree, “being different is problematic in that differentness prevents, or, at least, interferes with, full social acceptance and personal development” (Coleman, 1985, p. 163). In our anti-intellectual culture, gifted students who feel different from their



peers face a “forced choice dilemma” of deciding between social acceptance and high achievement (Jung, Barnett, Gross, & McCormick, 2011).

Although there are numerous definitions of “giftedness,” for the purpose of this paper, gifted students are those who “demonstrate outstanding levels of aptitude or competence in one or more domains” (NAGC, n.d. b, p. 1). The research reviewed uses a variety of disparate definitions of giftedness according to the identification criteria of the school or program being studied, but this National Association for Gifted Children definition is broad enough to encompass most others.

**Feelings of difference.** Gifted children and adolescents differ from their chronological age peers academically as well as socially, and they begin to become aware of these differences at an early age (Gross, 1998). As soon as gifted students begin school, they begin to hear negative comments about their giftedness from peers and adults. They also start to make normative comparisons and notice the differences between themselves and the majority of their classmates (Gross, 1998). Being identified as gifted in school can cause social alienation or isolation or can simply exacerbate students’ existing social problems. Even though the label of “gifted” is socially valued, “labeling is a social process that can have both positive and negative effects on the labeled student” (Berlin, 2009, p. 219).

Kerr, Colangelo, and Gaeth (1988) found that gifted students feel ambivalent about their gifted label. They surveyed 184 high school students in a gifted program about how they perceived their giftedness and found that 91% of students accepted and affirmed the label. However, 43% of students felt that their label negatively impacted others, and only 5% felt the label was positive for others. Moreover, 90% of students

surveyed claimed that the worst part of being gifted was its social effects. However, Manaster, Chan, Watt, and Wiehe (1994) partially replicated the Kerr et al. (1988) study and found less dramatic results, arguing, “The current study suggests that there is no major struggle in coming to terms with their own giftedness for many gifted adolescents” (p. 178). Even so, a large majority (87%) of their respondents asserted that the worst aspect of giftedness was social. These students face stereotypes such as “nerd” and “snob,” jealousy, social isolation and alienation, and peers who misunderstand them (Manaster et al., 1994).

More recently, Berlin (2009) explored student perceptions about being labeled gifted and talented. Contrary to prior research, she found that highly gifted students ranked making friends as a very positive side effect of giftedness. Both moderately and highly gifted students ranked social factors, including negative stereotypes, as unimportant. Berlin speculates that her respondents’ participation in a gifted program gave these students a social cohort that shielded them from the negative perceptions found in earlier studies (e.g. Kerr et al., 1988; Manaster et al., 1994).

Though some researchers (e.g., Berlin, 2009; Farmer & Farmer, 1996; Rimm, 2002) suggest that homogeneous gifted programming and similar-ability cohorts can reduce or eliminate feelings of social differentness, current research continues to indicate that gifted students have social difficulties regardless of placement. Adams-Byers, Whitsell, and Moon (2004) found that gifted students experienced feelings of differentness whether or not they participated in homogeneous, separate gifted programs. Cross et al. (1993) found that, although gifted students did not feel socially different from their non-gifted peers, they did believe that other students, teachers, and friends saw them

as different. Feelings of difference, regardless of their validity, can cause emotional and intellectual frustration for gifted students (Gross, 1998).

More significantly, negative social outcomes such as depression, feelings of isolation, and suicidal thoughts are all associated with giftedness, and gifted individuals may experience “difficulty in creating and maintaining social relationships” (Plucker & Levy, 2001, p. 75). Peterson and Ray (2006) surveyed 432 gifted eighth grade students and found that 67% of them had experienced bullying, which was associated with negative attitudes about school, academic performance, and self-confidence.

As with students who identify as LGBTQ, researchers remind us that “the problems of social isolation, peer rejection, loneliness, and alienation that afflict many gifted children arise *not* out of their exceptional intellectual abilities, but as a result of society’s response to them” (Gross, 2002, p. 25). However, because gifted students are often particularly intense or sensitive (Piechowski, 1999), they may feel such effects more strongly than typical children (Peterson & Ray, 2006).

***Stigma of giftedness paradigm.*** Goffman (1963) theorized that stigmatized groups can alleviate their stigma by controlling social information. According to this theory, gifted students are motivated to behave in ways that can help them blend in with non-gifted peers or disidentify with their giftedness. Cross et al. (1993) used the Student Attitude Questionnaire with gifted high school students at a residential summer program and found that over half of the students reported controlling social information in this way by omitting comments that would have alienated others. The researchers attributed this to the students’ desires to have normal social interactions, one of the tenets of Coleman’s Stigma of Giftedness Paradigm (1985). The Stigma of Giftedness Paradigm

states that gifted students want normal social interactions, believe gifted people are treated differently, and therefore manipulate potentially stigmatizing social situations by using social coping strategies.

**Coping strategies.** Because gifted children and adolescents believe themselves to be stereotyped and stigmatized (Berlin, 2009), they behave in certain ways to cope with their perceived or actual social differentness. Cross (1997) expanded upon Coleman's theory by exploring the strategies that gifted students use to cope with stigmatizing social situations. Students sometimes use negative strategies like blending in with their non-gifted peers, underachieving, or even attempting suicide. More positive social coping strategies include getting involved in hobbies, extracurriculars, and physical activities. Cross (1997) proposed a continuum of visibility that gifted students use to mediate the information available in stigmatizing social situations. "The continuum attempted to represent the possible range in the goals for the coping behaviors from telling the truth and thus standing out from the group to lying in an effort to blend in totally with other students" (Cross, 1997, p. 189).

Other researchers built upon these theories to explore specific strategies gifted students use to mediate social situations. In particular, Swiatek (1995) reviewed the literature and found that possible coping strategies used by gifted students included minimizing the visibility of giftedness, denying giftedness, denying concern about possible social rejection, and getting involved in extracurricular activities. Based on these strategies, Swiatek created the 35 item Social Coping Questionnaire (SCQ), which allowed students to consider the extent to which they used various social coping strategies on a seven point Likert-type scale. Factor analyses and subsequent revisions of

the scale eventually yielded five empirically supported coping strategies that approximate Cross's (1997) continuum: denial of giftedness, emphasis on popularity, peer acceptance, social interaction, and hiding giftedness (Swiatek & Dorr, 1998).

The SCQ has been used repeatedly with identified gifted and high-achieving students in the U.S. and China (e.g., Chan, 2003; Chan, 2004; Cross & Swiatek, 2009; Foust, Rudasill, & Callahan, 2006; Rudasill, Foust, & Callahan, 2007; Swiatek, 1995; Swiatek, 2001; Swiatek & Cross, 2007; Swiatek & Dorr, 1998). Factor analyses have varied, but three constant factors—denying giftedness, peer acceptance, and social interaction—were found in each study (Cross & Swiatek, 2009).

***Denying or hiding giftedness.*** Denial of giftedness means that students minimize their difference from others unintentionally by failing to recognize their own high ability. Students who use this strategy say or think things like, “I am just lucky in school” (Swiatek & Dorr, 1998). Students who instead hide their giftedness are aware of their high ability but choose to downplay it so that it is less noticeable to others (Swiatek & Dorr, 1998). Gross (1998) explains, “To be valued within a peer culture which values conformity, gifted young people may mask their giftedness and develop alternative identities which are perceived as more socially acceptable” (p. 167). Students who use these strategies might avoid academically-oriented, “nerdy” school clubs (Rimm, 2002), use less sophisticated vocabulary, downplay or ignore their personal accomplishments, or refrain from volunteering in class (Ablard, 1997).

These coping strategies are the most detrimental to gifted students because they can stunt achievement. When students deny or try to hide their giftedness, they “compromise...the development of [their] academic potential, for the sake of peer

acceptance” (Gross, 1998, p. 169). Students who deny their own giftedness may lose sight of their true identity (Gross, 1998), while students who hide their giftedness may purposely underachieve (Ablard, 1997). Under these conditions, gifted students cannot develop their talents to levels commensurate with their abilities.

***Emphasis on popularity and peer acceptance.*** Some students believe that being popular and conforming to social norms in school is highly important, while others place more value in other aspects of their lives (Swiatek, 1995; Swiatek & Dorr, 1998). By de-emphasizing the importance of popularity, gifted students can more easily cope with being unpopular. Similarly, peer acceptance, the degree to which gifted students feel accepted by other students, is another coping strategy (Swiatek & Dorr, 1998).

Students who already feel accepted by their peers have less need to use other social coping strategies. Similarly, students who do not strongly value popularity feel less pressure to cope with their feelings of social difference because they do not find them important or relevant. Therefore, these social coping strategies may have the least effect on achievement. However, because they are based in attitudes rather than actions, they cannot be strategically used by students who hold different views about popularity and peer acceptance.

***Social interaction.*** This factor describes the degree to which students participate in extracurricular activities or help other students in order to form positive social bonds (Swiatek & Dorr, 1998). Gifted students can use their talents to help their peers (Barber & Mueller, 2011), a coping strategy which is positive both socially and academically. They may also choose to participate in extracurricular activities with others who have similar interests (Barber & Mueller, 2011). This allows students to develop their talents

and build positive social relationships with a cohort of peers with similar interests (Rimm, 2002). Finally, gifted students are more likely to form close relationships with teachers and other adults (Rimm, 2002), which can help them feel more involved in the school community (Barber & Mueller, 2011).

**Group differences.** Various studies have yielded uncertain but important group differences in social coping among gifted students of different genders, ages, abilities, races, cultures, socioeconomic statuses, and exceptionalities. Research by Jung et al. (2011) suggests that being forced to choose between acceptance and achievement has more of an impact on men, younger adolescents, and members of minority cultures. Similarly, gifted students experience fewer social repercussions for their intelligence if they are masculine boys or pretty girls (Rimm, 2002), but may experience extreme bullying or social pressure if they are androgynous, overweight, or otherwise nonconforming (Kerr & Cohn, 2001). Therefore, some groups have a stronger need to cope with social differences than others.

There are also differences in the frequencies with which each population uses each strategy. For example, several studies found a gender difference suggesting that female students are more likely to deny their giftedness than male students (Swiatek, 2001; Swiatek & Cross, 2007; Swiatek & Dorr, 1995). Research also indicates that female students use more socially oriented coping strategies, including high levels of interpersonal activity, social interaction, valuing peer acceptance, and helping, than male students (Chan, 2004; Swiatek, 2001; Swiatek & Dorr, 2007).

Age effects are also evident: younger adolescents are less likely to help others (Swiatek, 2001) and more likely to minimize their focus on popularity (Chan, 2004;

Foust et al., 2006), while older students often deny or hide their giftedness instead (Foust et al., 2006). Finally, studies exploring the relationship between intelligence and social coping suggest that highly gifted students may be more likely to deny their giftedness (Swiatek, 1995) and discount the importance of popularity (Chan, 2004).

These group differences suggest “gifted students should not be treated as a homogenous group” (Rudsill et al., 2007). Instead, gender, age, and ability level should all be taken into account when researching the social situations that gifted students encounter and the social coping strategies they use to mitigate those situations. Similarly, sexual orientation and gender identity might interact with giftedness so that students who are both gifted and LGBTQ use different social coping strategies with different frequencies than do other groups.

Research should also consider whether LGBTQ students use similar coping strategies to mediate social situations. Because both giftedness and sexual orientation/gender identity are not outwardly discernible (Cross, 1997; Stewart, 2006), both groups of students have the ability to deny or hide their giftedness, while most other minority groups cannot mask their differentness. Therefore, their coping strategies may be especially similar. These similarities are explored in the next section.

### **Gifted and LGBTQ Students**

Gifted students and LGBTQ students are both minorities in the population. Cohn (2002) estimates that the probability of being both gifted and LGBTQ is about one to three in 1,000. Therefore, in a large high school of 3,000 students, about three to nine students will be gifted and LGBTQ. Some studies (e.g., Friedrichs, 2011) suggest that a higher prevalence is possible, but even the largest projections indicate that a very small



minority of students are both gifted and LGBTQ in any given school. Because of their extreme minority status and their unique intersecting identities, these students face unique challenges.

**Intersecting identities.** To work effectively with all students, educators must “embrace the complexities of their multiple identities and develop the capacity to understand the intersections among them” (Blackburn & McCready, 2009, p. 228). It is important to recognize that some students are *both* gifted and LGBTQ. Their multiple identities intersect and interact with each other (Schilt & Westbrook, 2009), and their feelings of social differentness may be intensified because of their dual differences (Peterson & Rischar, 2000). These students also have race, class, sex, ethnicity, religion, and/or disability characteristics that further mitigate their sexual orientations, gender identities, and above-average abilities. Any particular student may be more, less, or differently affected by the dual stigmas of giftedness and LGBTQ identities because of the cultural and social effects of these other identities (APA, 2008; 2011).

Peterson and Rischar (2000) studied gifted and LGB students and found negative patterns of isolation, depression, and underachievement as well as positive themes such as high achievement and involvement in activities. Giftedness has been associated with androgyny and non-stereotypical gender behavior (Tolan, 1997). While girls may have more social flexibility, boys are especially pressured to act masculine, and both giftedness and LGBTQ identity violate that social norm. Therefore, Kerr and Cohn (2001) worry that “gay gifted boys will struggle with dual problems of being gifted and gay, perhaps trying to hide both, and losing themselves in the process” (p. 149). Even straight gifted boys often show particular sensitivities or have unusual, gender atypical

interests and talents, so they are particularly likely to underachieve to reaffirm their masculinity (Kerr & Cohn, 2001; Stewart, 2006).

**Challenges and needs.** Students who are both gifted and LGBTQ may become aware of their LGBTQ identities and their resultant social struggles earlier than most people because of their advanced cognitive development (Stewart, 2006; Tolan, 1997). Some gifted adolescents are “high profile” in school because of their academic achievements or talents, so gifted students who wish to come out of the closet as LGBTQ may feel like they have more at stake (Peterson & Rischard, 2000). Furthermore, very sensitive or intense gifted students may be particularly aware harassment or discrimination and therefore feel that it is necessary to hide their identities as protection (Treat, 2010).

Eriksson and Stewart (2005) compared the characteristics and educational needs of gifted students and LGBT students and found similarities and interactions between the two groups. Students from both groups feel pressured to hide their giftedness and/or sexual orientation or gender identity. To overcome these social stigmas, both groups need mentors, peer groups, and normalizing school experiences. Therefore, it is especially important to provide gifted and LGBTQ students access to role models who are also both gifted and LGBTQ, in person or through books (Vare & Norton, 2004; Cross, 2005).

Preliminary research has suggested that the brains of lesbian and gay individuals may differ from heterosexual brains (Cohn, 2002). For gifted students, this means that traditional gendered strengths—men who are visually-spatially talented and women who express verbal gifts—do not necessarily hold true for LGBTQ students (Cohn, 2002). Bullying and homophobia may hinder the expression of “opposite” gender talents such

artistic talents in boys and athletic, mathematical, or mechanical talents in girls (Cohn, 2002; Kerr & Cohn, 2001). Therefore, teachers and counselors need to be careful to guide gifted and LGBTQ adolescents in choosing career and post-secondary educational opportunities that align with their unique interests and gifts rather than pigeonholing them into stereotypically gay or straight occupations (NAGC, n.d. a; Friedrichs, 2011). Counselors must be especially well-informed in order to assist students in finding LGBTQ-friendly colleges (Friedrichs, 2011).

***Resilience.*** Despite the social risk of being doubly different from their peers, some researchers suggest that gifted and LGBTQ students have strengths which allow them to overcome their obstacles. The American Psychological Association (2008) asserts that LGB students “who are socially competent, who have good problem-solving skills, who have a sense of autonomy and purpose, and who look forward to the future” (p. 4)—all characteristics of gifted students—can usually overcome stressful situations. Bland, Sowa, and Callahan (1994) suggest that gifted children are especially resilient because they can abstractly, cognitively appraise a stressful situation and choose to ignore the stressor in order to work toward a goal. Finally, a study of urban gifted high schoolers found that these students framed cultural diversity as “an important part of their identity,” which “helped them to become better adults” (Reis, Hébert, Díaz, Maxfield, & Ratley, 1995, p. 32). Therefore, for some students, cultural differences such as being LGBTQ may actually facilitate identity development rather than hinder it. Still, the dual stigma of being gifted and LGBTQ must not be taken lightly, and even the most resilient students must use social coping strategies to deal with their differences.

**Coping strategies.** Because they are very cognitively aware of stereotypes, some gifted and LGBTQ students try to exaggerate their gender nonconformity or flamboyance to live up to how LGBTQ people are “supposed” to act (Peterson & Rischar, 2000). Others take the opposite approach, trying to suppress any stereotypical behavior and even hide their identities by forming opposite-sex relationships (Kerr & Cohn, 2001; Peterson & Rischar, 2000). Either strategy can be developmentally harmful, because LGBTQ students cope best when they can form understanding about their own identity. However, gifted students’ advanced cognitive abilities make them more willing and able to pursue information about sexual orientation and gender identity (Peterson & Rischar, 2000).

Many coping strategies serve to compensate for or draw attention from the “weakness” of being LGBTQ. Such strategies can also be extremely negative. Some gifted and LGBTQ students underachieve, drop out of school to avoid harassment, abuse drugs and alcohol, or attempt suicide (Kerr & Cohn, 2001). Coping strategies can also include positive techniques such as high achievement in academics or athletics and involvement in extracurricular activities (Harbeck, 1994; Kerr & Cohn, 2001; Peterson & Rischar, 2000). However, over-involvement and overachievement may exacerbate gifted students’ perfectionist tendencies as they try to compensate for the stigma of being LGBTQ and maintain control in the face of oppression (Harbeck, 1994).

One of the most positive ways gifted and LGBTQ students can cope with their social differences is by using their intelligence. Students can use their talents, including writing, political action, creativity, and humor (Peterson & Rischar, 2000), as expressive outlets and as a means for social change. Their advanced intellectual abilities allow these

students to “shift perspectives and...to spar, debate, and argue with the most adroit gay basher” (Peterson & Rischar, 2000, p. 239).

Finally, research suggests that gifted and LGBTQ students, like all LGBTQ students, use Gay-Straight Alliances to provide safe spaces and supportive peers. However, gifted students are more likely to see such organizations as opportunities to express their talents and develop their capacity for leadership. “Bright, creative teens are often at the core of instigating a GSA or particular GSA-sponsored projects” (Friedman-Nimz et al., 2006, p. 261). Hébert (2012) asserts that social action, volunteering, and being able to help others helps gifted students to look beyond their own social problems. GSAs are one way that gifted and LGBTQ students can become socially active in their school communities. Lee (2002) found that LGBTQ students attributed increased academic achievement and post-secondary planning to their participation in a GSA. Membership and leadership in the group empowered these students, taught them how to effect change in their lives, and gave them hope for the future.

### **Need for the Study**

Many teachers have committed to protecting the rights of LGBTQ students (Bowman, 2001). Specifically, the National Association for Gifted Children (NAGC) “supports practices of equitable and sensitive treatment of GLBT youth and recommends that educators demonstrate understanding and equity toward gifted GLBT students in their schools” (NAGC, n.d. a, p. 1). Furthermore, its first three standards for effective gifted education programming pertain to developing students’ self-understanding and respect for others’ similarities and differences (NAGC, 2010). LGBTQ students need knowledge, support, and sensitivity from educators in order to develop such self-

understanding. Teachers must provide such support consistently, even without knowing that any of their students are LGBTQ, because many students do not come out of the closet until after middle school and high school (NAGC, n.d. a). Counselors, too, need to “know about the secrets and stigmas involved both in being gifted and GLBT” (Friedrichs, 2011, p. 170) so that they can effectively relate to and support students. Whether the goal of gifted education is student self-actualization (Hébert, 2012) or high achievement and innovation in talent areas (Subotnik & Rickoff, 2010), students cannot reach their full potential if they go to school every day in a hostile environment.

A recent study by the Center for Work-Policy (Hewlett & Sumberg, 2011), a nonprofit think tank, demonstrated that gifted and LGBTQ adults need self-understanding and societal acceptance of their differences as much as students. A survey of almost 3,000 respondents found that almost half (48%) of LGBTQ employees are closeted at work. Those employees who are open about their sexuality are “a highly desirable labor pool”—ambitious, committed, and well-educated—but closeted employees feel stalled, isolated, and dissatisfied with their achievement and are more likely to leave the company (Hewlett & Sumberg, 2011). If researchers can identify factors that help students cope with their differences while they are still in school, educators can help guide gifted and LGBTQ students to become productive *and* self-actualized adults. However, research in the area is sparse because most LGBTQ educational research is done outside of school settings (Donelson & Rogers, 2004) because of political repercussions (Cohn, 2002; Kerr & Cohn, 2001).

As evidenced in this review of the literature, although there is little research on gifted *and* LGBTQ students, there is no shortage of literature about students who are gifted *or* LGBTQ. However, it is important that new research address this particular intersection of two identities in order to reach gifted and LGBTQ students effectively. “Spaces, resources, and pedagogies often succeed in reaching only one portion of the targeted population and fail to address students who are marginalized on the basis of more than one identity” (Schilt & Westbrook, 2009, p. 30).

A thorough review of the literature yielded only 11 articles pertaining to students who are both gifted and LGBTQ. Of those, four are position papers (NAGC, n.d. a) or opinion pieces (Eriksson & Stewart, 2005; Friedrichs, 1997; Tolan, 1997) that were not formally peer reviewed or published. Three of the articles (Cohn, 2002; Friedrichs, 2011; Stewart, 2006) are comprehensive literature reviews with no empirical research contributions of their own. Two studies are in-depth cases of only a single participant (Treat, 2010) or organization (Friedman-Nimz, 2006). Only two studies (Peterson & Rischar, 2000; Treat, 2006;) make unique and generalizable research contributions to the literature on gifted and LGBTQ students. Therefore, this area is fertile ground for further research.

Although the population of students who are both gifted and LGBTQ is small, educators have made commitments to respect and defend these students. Further research must give them the tools to do so.

**Research Questions**

This study addresses the social intersections of giftedness and LGBTQ identities by answering the following questions: What social coping strategies are used by gifted and LGBTQ adolescents? How often is each strategy used? How do intersections between giftedness and LGBTQ identity impact social coping? How can teachers and schools support and facilitate gifted and LGBTQ students' identity and talent development?



### **Chapter 3: Methods and Procedures**

This study investigated the social coping strategies used by gifted and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer students. Retrospective, semi-structured interviews provided insights into several research questions: What social coping strategies are used by gifted and LGBTQ adolescents? How often is each strategy used? How do intersections between giftedness and LGBTQ identity impact social coping? How can teachers and schools support and facilitate gifted and LGBTQ students' identity and talent development?

This study was exempted from formal review by the Education Internal Review Committee at the College of William and Mary (Appendix A).

#### **Subjects and Sample**

Research participants were 13 undergraduate students (ages 18-22) at a middle-sized (enrollment about 7,000), highly selective, public Southeastern university. All participants self-identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer (LGBTQ), or another non-normative sexual orientation or gender identity.

A purposive homogeneous sample was selected because participants needed to meet specific identity, ability, and age variables for the study (Patton, 2001). First, participants had to identify as LGBTQ or another non-normative sexual orientation or gender identity. Second, participants needed to be gifted. Because of the lack of uniformity among gifted programs and identification processes in K-12 education, participants did not have to be formally identified as gifted as children; rather, they were considered gifted by virtue of their enrollment at a highly selective post-secondary institution. Third, participants had to be between the ages of 18 and 22 so that they were

both old enough to consent to participate in the study and young enough to have accurate and meaningful memories of their experiences in middle school and high school. These three criteria were specific enough that a purposive sample was necessary to obtain enough participants.

Participants were recruited through the university's LGBTQ undergraduate student organization. Most members of that group were between the ages of 18 and 22 and identified as LGBTQ, and all were considered gifted for the purposes of this study. The researcher attended two separate organization meetings to explain the purpose of the study and to recruit participants. Sixteen members of the organization expressed initial interest and 13 followed through to participate in an interview. One participant's interview was discounted because of a technical problem recording the interview and because that individual was an international student with a vastly different K-12 educational and societal context. Therefore, a total of 12 interviews were used in the study.

### **Procedures**

The researcher garnered interest for participation by attending two meetings of the university's LGBTQ student organization. She described the study and discussed possible interview questions (Appendix B). Interested members spoke to the researcher after the meeting and provided their email addresses. Members of the organization were also given the researcher's email in person and by a listserv email so that they had the option to express interest and/or participate confidentially, but no members took advantage of this. All 16 members who provided email addresses were then emailed with additional information to ascertain their level of interest in the study (Appendix C). Thirteen

participants responded to that email and were sent an informed consent document (Appendix D) and a list of sample interview questions (Appendix B). Interviews were scheduled via email.

All interviews occurred during the day on weekends or during the evening on weekdays during a span of two weeks at the beginning of the spring semester. Eleven interviews took place in an empty classroom on campus at the university and one interview was conducted online via Skype. In each case, the researcher and interviewee were the only people present to ensure confidentiality. The researcher introduced herself to the interviewee, described the purpose of the study, and offered to answer any questions. Each participant signed the informed consent document and gave additional verbal permission for the researcher to record the interview and take notes. The researcher reminded participants that they could skip questions or stop the interview at any time.

The researcher then conducted the semi-structured interview, asking initial questions and follow-up questions as necessary. Interviews ranged from 14 to 86 minutes long, with a mean length of 41 minutes. No participants chose to skip questions or to terminate the interview. At the end of each interview, participants were given the opportunity to ask questions, debriefed again about the nature of the study, and told that they would receive the results of the study if interested.

### **Instrumentation**

This study used semi-structured interviews in order to strike a balance between letting participants structure their own thoughts and being able to compare and contrast experiences and coping strategies (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). The researcher created a list

of questions prior to the interviews (Appendix B) to use “as a basic checklist during the interview to make sure that all relevant topics are covered” (Patton, 2001, p. 342). In this way, the researcher was able to collect all relevant information while allowing the participants to guide the direction and emphasis of the interview.

A review of the literature on social coping strategies used by gifted and LGBTQ students guided the development of questions. The interview protocol contained 13 baseline questions and four potential questions designed to encourage elaboration. For example, participants were asked, “How did you cope with feelings of differentness,” and then were prompted with follow-up questions about previously identified social coping strategies such as talking to friends, teachers, or family; joining a Gay-Straight Alliance; participating in extracurricular activities; and/or staying “in the closet” to hide differentness (see Appendix B for the complete interview protocol). The researcher also asked follow-up questions beyond the scope of the interview guide to ensure clarity and comprehensiveness in the participants’ answers.

### **Data Collection**

The informed consent documents were stored with notes from the interview in a locked drawer. Notes were labeled by number and contained no references to names. Interviews were recorded using a digital audio recorder for accuracy during transcription. Recordings were labeled by number in the order the interviews occurred and were never associated with participants’ names (unless they were mentioned during the course of the interview). The researcher transcribed all interviews and labeled them by number (Appendix E). Names were removed from the transcriptions. Digital files (both audio files and text documents) were stored on a password protected computer.

## **Data Analysis**

Data from transcribed interviews were interpreted and analyzed descriptively. Demographic information was reported using descriptive statistics. Open coding, “the process of breaking down, examining, comparing, conceptualizing, and categorizing data” (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 61), was used to identify and highlight common themes and unique experiences among participants. After 12 interviews, the researcher concluded that no further themes or patterns would emerge from the data (Rubin & Rubin, 1995).

The researcher coded the data iteratively in order to allow themes to emerge (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Following the procedures outlined by Bogdan and Biklen (2003), the transcribed interviews (Appendix E) were ordered chronologically and read twice in their entirety. The researcher identified possible coding categories from frequently emerging themes and the social coping strategies previously identified in the literature. These preliminary codes were manually assigned to the data, modified to more comprehensively capture the scope of respondents’ answers, and then re-assigned. Overarching codes were assigned to categorize the information into broad themes: social environment, feelings, coping strategies, gifted and LGBTQ interactions, and suggestions for teachers and schools. Finally, the data were interpreted and re-contextualized in light of the unique dual-identities (gifted and LGBTQ) of the participants (Cresswell, 1994).

## **Summary**

The researcher gathered interview data from 12 gifted and LGBTQ college students. Participants discussed their middle school and high school experiences, feelings, and behaviors they used to cope with feeling doubly different from their peers because of their gifted and LGBTQ identities. The interview data were coded and five

themes emerged: social environment, feelings, coping strategies, gifted and LGBTQ interactions, and suggestions for teachers and schools. In the next chapter, data are analyzed by these themes and applied to the following research questions: What social coping strategies are used by gifted and LGBTQ adolescents? How often is each strategy used? How do intersections between giftedness and LGBTQ identity impact social coping? How can teachers and schools support and facilitate gifted and LGBTQ students' identity and talent development?

## **Chapter 4: Data Collection and Analysis**

### **Research Questions**

In this study, 12 undergraduate students were interviewed about their social experiences in middle school and high school as gifted and LGBTQ adolescents, dually different from the majority of their peers. The following research questions were addressed: What social coping strategies are used by gifted and LGBTQ adolescents? How often is each strategy used? How do intersections between giftedness and LGBTQ identity impact social coping? How can teachers and schools support and facilitate gifted and LGBTQ students' identity and talent development?

### **Participant Demographics**

All 12 participants were undergraduate students at a middle-sized, highly selective, public Southeastern university who self-identified as LGBTQ (see Table 1 for an overview). Participants ranged in age from 18 to 22, with a mean age of 19.7. Seven students identified as gay or lesbian, two identified as bisexual, and three used other terms (queer, pansexual, and femmesexual) to describe their sexual orientations. Five participants were men, six were woman, and one identified as a transsexual, genderqueer man. Eight students were Caucasian, two were African American, and two reported mixed ethnicities (Indian/Greek and White/Middle Eastern/Hispanic).

For the purposes of this study, giftedness was operationalized by enrollment at a highly selective university. However, all 12 participants were identified as gifted in elementary and middle school, enrolled in honors, Advanced Placement, International Baccalaureate, or dual enrollment courses in high school, or both.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

Data was collected through semi-structured interviews about participants' experiences, feelings, and behaviors during middle school, high school, and college. Interviews were transcribed and iteratively coded to determine emergent themes. Overarching codes were used to categorize the information into broad themes: social environment, feelings, coping strategies, gifted and LGBTQ interactions, and suggestions for teachers and schools. Participants are referred to by pseudonyms in this report.

### **Results**

All participants were "out of the closet," at least semi-public about their LGBTQ identities, at the time of this research. Eleven participants were out during high school, and one participant was out during middle school as well. These participants first realized they were LGBTQ between the ages of 10 and 17, with a mean age of 13. They came out of the closet to parents, friends, or both between the ages of 13 and 19, with a mean age of 15.4 (see Table 1).

### **Social Environment**

Seven of the twelve participants reported negative social interactions in school as a result of their being gifted, LGBTQ, or both. Many of the social interactions were indirect. For example, other students pried into the participants' private lives and gossiped about them behind their back. Justin explained that when his peers found out he was gay, "news spread like wildfire" (Justin, personal communication, February 7, 2012). Participants also reported noticing and being negatively affected by homophobic comments, even if they were not directed at anyone in particular. When Nate heard comments like "that's so gay" and homophobic slurs like "faggot," he explained, "those



things were very disturbing and distressing... especially in the moment when you're pursuing your sexuality or trying to figure out who you are" (Nate, personal communication, January 29, 2012).

Three participants reported more direct harassment because of their sexual orientation or gender expression. Chris recalled, "There were times when I felt physically unsafe, but I was never physically harmed" (Chris, personal communication, February 6, 2012). He believed that school policies held his harassers back: "if you beat someone up in the high school, you're still going to get suspended, no matter how homophobic the administrators are." Other participants reported direct verbal attacks, both in and out of classes.

Several participants were very aware of the heteronormative nature of their classes and extracurricular activities. These institutions reinforced heterosexuality almost unconsciously. For example, Jackie recalled an experience during a poetry unit in English class where her teacher asked the students to pretend to write love poems—the boys to their girlfriends, and the girls to their boyfriends (Jackie, personal communication, February 2, 2012). She stated, "I just remember thinking, I don't fit in that, at all." Other participants noticed heteronormativity in extracurricular activities. For example, while his peers in his Boy Scout troop looked at and commented on girls in a magazine, Walter felt alienated: "They were able to freely...be part of the group, but if I had said anything I would have been ostracized" (Walter, personal communication, February 9, 2012). The privileging of straightness over LGBTQ identities in these situations made these students feel different from their peers.

Students were affected by the speech and actions of their peers, teachers, and curricula, but they were also cognizant of homophobia within the society at large. Unprompted, participants expressed frequent concerns about the political climate of their hometowns, often describing them as conservative and rural pockets where “gay was just a thing that didn’t happen” (Jackie). Participants were upset by the broader political climate, including anti-gay political candidates and legislation, as well.

Two thirds of participants mentioned religion as a strong force that affected their social acceptance as LGBTQ individuals. Two participants attended Catholic schools, where they felt a particularly strong stigma against homosexuality. Other participants worried about their parents’ or friends’ religious convictions. Most students felt that their religion was at odds with their sexuality.

Finally, almost half the participants mentioned race or ethnicity as a factor in their social acceptance. Monica, an African American participant, said that there was a strong stigma against homosexuality outside of the Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA) at her predominantly Black high school (Monica, personal communication, February 10, 2012). She explained, “in the Black community, they try to pretend that it’s non-existent.” White participants were also aware of the sometimes negative interaction between different cultural groups and acceptance of their LGBTQ identities.

Although it was less common, some participants reported similar harassment because of their gifted identity instead of or in addition to their LGBTQ identity. For example, students were teased for always being the one to answer the teacher in class. Kristen reported, “I feel like a lot of people didn’t talk to me because we were in the gifted and talented programs” (Kristen, personal communication, February 5, 2012).

Although most participants did experience negative social interactions, they were fortunate to have largely supportive family and friends. All but one participant reported having at least one close friend or friend group who accepted them for being LGBTQ. Furthermore, eight felt fully supported by their families, and one participant, who was not out to her parents, nevertheless felt certain that they would respond positively. Nate noted, “I’m really fortunate... People are kicked out by their families.” Three participants’ families gave mixed, somewhat negative reactions when their children came out as LGBTQ, but no extreme reactions were reported. This high rate of familial acceptance is most likely an artifact of the unrepresentative sample studied. Many LGBTQ students, homeless at disproportionally high rates because of familial conflict (Ray, 2006), are unable to attend universities or to participate in studies such as this one.

### **Feelings**

When participants were asked whether they felt different from their peers, Nancy replied, “I knew I was sort of different [for being bisexual], but I also felt different from a lot of people because of being smart” (Nancy, personal communication, January 31, 2012). This was a common sentiment. Ten participants reported feeling different for being LGBTQ, and nine reported feeling different for being gifted. Therefore, most participants felt socially different from their classmates in two ways. These feelings of difference started as early as elementary school for some participants.

One reason students felt so different from their peers was that their status as both gifted and LGBTQ made them feel isolated, as though no one else could share their experiences. As Kristen expressed, “I really felt like I was the only one going through that.” The participants felt “alone all the time” (Nate), like they were “one person against

everyone else” (Jackie). Some students had additional social differences, such as race, that further compounded their isolation. For example, Monica “wanted to know that I wasn’t the only one, the only Black pansexual or bisexual person.”

Half the participants expressed feeling scared or anxious about the social repercussions of their LGBTQ identities. For instance, when Justin, who heard the word “faggot” used frequently and even used it himself, realized “that the word could be used or inflicted upon me, [it] was just really scary in a lot of ways.” Participants were worried about how classmates, parents, and friends would react to their coming out; scared to stick up for themselves in heteronormative spaces; and afraid to seek out safe spaces such as GSAs because others might then discover their identity. Aware of negative media representations of LGBTQ individuals, the participants were “worried that the worst might happen” (Walter).

Two participants reported experiencing clinical depression during high school, and others expressed feelings of extreme unhappiness because of their social situations. Justin recalled, “I kept getting really sad or angry or having this range of emotions that were always at extremes.” The students felt that their social differentness was unfair. Jackie “didn’t understand why people didn’t like her for being smart;” Adam thought it unfair that his peers got to have romantic relationships while he did not (Adam, personal communication, February 4, 2012); and Monica was upset by having to lead a “double life” among different groups of people.

Other participants were angry about their situation. Their anger was sparked by their unfriendly social environment but compounded by their perceived isolation. For example, when Jackie heard homophobic comments, she explained, “I just wanted to

always speak up, but I fell silent because I knew that I was maybe the only out person.” Other participants were angry because they did not understand the nature of their identities or social situations. Zack, the transsexual participant, expressed that “feeling wrong [in his body] translated into hating myself a lot” (Zack, personal communication, February 12, 2012). Adam, who was made fun of for not being masculine enough as early as middle school, “didn’t really know how to deal with teasing” at such a young age. Their pent-up anger resulted in misplaced emotions. “The littlest [thing] would set me off,” Justin noted. Other participants started holding grudges (Kristen) or fighting with their parents (Chris).

Other common themes that emerged from the data had more to do with students’ giftedness than their LGBTQ identities. For example, several participants expressed negative feelings about school because it was not challenging enough for them. Lisa never paid attention in class because “that was me hating school, because powerpoints, because it was so boring” (Lisa, personal communication, January 29, 2012), while Chris began to sleep during classes because he realized that he could pass them without trying.

### **Coping Strategies**

Students used a variety of strategies to cope with their feelings of differentness. Some strategies mirrored those found in Swiatek and Dorr’s (1998) Social Coping Questionnaire: denial of giftedness and LGBTQ identity, emphasis on popularity, peer acceptance, social interaction (including helping and involvement in extracurricular activities), and hiding giftedness and LGBTQ identity. Other students coped by coming out, just as Cross (1997) found that students tried to maximize visibility by standing out from the group. Some students found social strength from supportive teachers, family, or

friends. Finally, students coped by using the internet to build community, expressing themselves through areas of talent, or focusing on academics.

**Denial of gifted and LGBTQ identities.** Two thirds of participants mentioned either denying their sexual orientation or gender identity or specifically refusing to deny that aspect of themselves. Many students faced an internal struggle about their LGBTQ identity. Students who were particularly young when they realized their LGBTQ identities were more likely to deny their feelings. Nancy explained, “I fought it for a really long time, especially in seventh grade, trying to push back those feelings.” Justin named his ongoing struggle to deny these emotions and thoughts “being on ‘gaywatch’”—whenever he had a thought or feeling about being gay, he tried to suppress it. He recalled forcefully denying his thoughts: “When I started to realize that I was gay, I just went into a tailspin...I sure as hell wasn’t going to be thinking about guys, so I just told everyone I was going to become a priest.” Walter simply thought that “if I waited long enough it would go away” and, to facilitate the erasure of his same-sex attraction, he tried to date girls. Other participants denied their LGBTQ identities by avoiding other LGBTQ people: Zack stated, “I didn’t want to be associated with queer people because I think getting too close would make me have to look at myself.”

Some students, especially the bisexual participants who were dating opposite sex partners, were able to compartmentalize their identity with little trouble. However, participants generally viewed the strategy of denying their identity as negative, and some students refused to lie to themselves. Kristen felt she had to be true to her experiences. Chris agreed, explaining:

I knew I could not live any way that wasn't the way I am...It was worth it to me to put up with all that bullshit than it was for me to never have been romantically involved or never figure out things about my identity, or been in a relationship with a girl and just have a miserable life.

Zack, however, took a pragmatic approach: "I feel like being repressed, in general, is a bad thing...but I'm so glad I'm dealing with this [transsexual identity] now, my sophomore year in college, rather than in high school."

**Emphasis on popularity and peer acceptance.** Swiatek and Dorr (1998) found that some gifted students cope by downplaying the importance of popularity and conformity or of peer acceptance. One third of the participants in this study used this coping strategy to deal with their dual identities as gifted and LGBTQ. Nate simply expressed, "I didn't hang out with all the popular kids, because they were oppressive to me." Lisa placed even less of an emphasis on popularity:

You know how kids are trying to be cool and stuff, going to parties? I was like, 'This is stupid,' and I would just say it, tactlessly. I could be tactful, I just don't want to... I did feel differently from the school at-large, but I wasn't depressed about it or anything. They were like football kids and stuff. Who wants to be like them?

Jackie, on the other hand, downplayed the importance of peer acceptance of her identity as a lesbian, primarily because she had already been rejected by peers for her giftedness. "People didn't like me already," she recalled. "What harm could it do" to be extremely opinionated and outspoken about her LGBTQ identity? She explained that although she did not care that her peers hated her, "it just made day-to-day life difficult"

(Jackie). Her somewhat pointed comments suggest that, while students like Lisa might well discount the importance of popularity, some students find it difficult to totally forgo peer acceptance.

**Social interaction.** Swiatek and Dorr's (1998) "social interaction" coping strategy is broken into two components: helping behavior and participation in extracurricular activities. GSAs are a coping strategy particular to LGBTQ students that combine both helping and extracurricular participation.

**Helping and activism.** In gifted social coping studies (e.g., Swiatek & Dorr, 1998), helping usually took the form of providing academic assistance, but in this study, gifted and LGBTQ students often tried to help by becoming activists for the LGBTQ community. Monica described feeling an impetus to "support the cause, to teach people that, hey, we're just like you." Others tried to create safer spaces in their schools by creating and/or leading GSAs. Students also used helping as a coping strategy by participating in or leading service-based student organizations. At least half the participants were involved in some form of activism or service.

**Extracurricular activities.** All but one participant participated in extracurricular activities in their high schools. Many students were involved in sports, which "were always fun and a good way of just de-stressing in general" (Nancy). Several also participated in drama, a traditionally LGBTQ-friendly space. Chris and Zack agreed that drama "just attracts queer people...that's why I was so involved with it, because it was just a place where I could be myself" (Chris). Some participants chose extracurriculars that allowed them to express aspects of their gifted identity, such as chess club and anime



club, and many used extracurriculars to develop and express talents or leadership capacities, such as through participation in a band or a teen advisory board.

Most participants used their extracurricular activities as a way to fit in with their peers despite their gifted and LGBTQ differences. As Kelley explained, “I felt a lot more normal knowing that there were things in my life that were things that anyone could be doing” (Kelley, personal communication, February 7, 2012). Kristen, who was president of her high school sorority for two years, felt that membership in the organization gave her social credibility by publicly proclaiming, “My grades are good, I’m not awkward, I can talk to people, I can step so I’m cool, I’m in a group with cool people.” However, some extracurriculars ended up being socially harmful for participants. Organizations which emphasized and reified gender roles, such as Boy Scouts and the all-male sailing team, were negative experiences for participants.

***Gay-Straight Alliances.*** Gay-Straight Alliances (GSAs) are extracurricular activities that combine both the helping and the organizational aspects of the “social interaction” gifted coping strategy (Swiatek & Dorr, 1998). GSAs are also one of the most researched LGBTQ coping strategies (e.g., Friedman-Nimz et al., 2006; GLSEN, 2010; Lee, 2002). However, only four of the participants in this study had GSAs at their high schools, and only two, Monica and Adam, were members of their GSA. One participant, Zack, did not attend because he was not yet out; another, Kelley, obeyed her parents’ request that she not participate in the GSA.

Those participants who did participate were extremely active in the groups. Monica felt that the GSA, which was only active for one of her four years, was “pretty much the only safe place” in her predominantly Black high school. Adam and one of his

friends took leadership roles in their GSA, trying to “restart [it] and make it better.” Two other participants, Lisa and Chris, tried unsuccessfully to start GSAs at their schools. The participants from schools without GSAs explained that their schools were too conservative or too religious for such organizations to take root. For Nate, the result was that “I didn’t really feel like I had a place to belong anywhere.”

**Hiding gifted and LGBTQ identities.** None of the participants in the study chose to completely hide their giftedness from their peers, but all 12 discussed the conscious choice to hide or downplay their LGBTQ identity in some way. One participant “did a lot of lying” when peers asked him about his sexual orientation (Nate). In other situations, participants tried to avoid the topic when it came up. Participants did whatever was necessary to fit in despite their dual differences.

Strategies ranged from “focusing on superficial [conversations] with friends to be accepted” (Nate) to trying drugs in order to fit in with non-gifted peers (Kristen). Several participants tried to minimize gender non-normative behaviors. Justin consciously chose to hide his more feminine “mannerisms, and the thoughts that I had, and the music that I was interested in, and the shows that I wanted to watch.” Before he was out as transsexual, Zack was particularly girly, “partly because I do like feminine things,” but partly as a means of “over-compensating... I wanted to fill that role... I wanted to perform my gender correctly and be attractive.”

One of the most common strategies participants used to hide their LGBTQ identities was self-censoring. Jackie recalled, “I started noticing how hard it is to talk about things with people...it’s so much harder when you’re choosing your language...Even now, sometimes I’ll catch myself substituting words, being afraid to say

something, because what if they react badly.” Jackie mentioned hiding her identity in specific situations, such as by substituting the word “girlfriend” with “friend” in conversations with certain people, but other participants censored themselves more strongly. Walter withdrew socially altogether to avoid talking about his sexual orientation: “I didn’t say what was on my mind... I was very quiet.”

For every participant, the extent to which they hid their sexual orientation and gender identity was a conscious choice. Nate explained, “I had to understand how to interpret [my sexuality] and how it would be viewed in the setting of my high school.” Chris was very open about his sexual orientation and visibly dated a new boyfriend during freshman year of high school, but as he began to notice “a direct correlation between me visibly dating someone at school and people calling me names and making fun of me or saying hateful things,” he stopped drawing attention to his LGBTQ identity. Justin chose to hide his sexual orientation because “keeping this secret solely to myself meant that I had control over it and meant that no one else could control it and manipulate it.” Adam, aware of how others perceived him, noted that “there was some interaction between how I acted and stereotypes.”

There was a noticeable gender difference in the extent to which participants hid their LGBTQ identity. Most of the participants mentioned above are men. The women also consciously chose how much of their LGBTQ identity to reveal in certain social situations, but they were far more open. Lisa “told anyone who asked” about her sexual orientation, and Jackie and Kelley did not advertise their sexual orientations but also “didn’t hide.” Nancy and Jackie both noticed that sexual orientation was more easily noticed for boys than girls, and the social repercussions for boys who were perceived as

gay were far greater. Additionally, three of the six women in this study were bisexual or pansexual and, at times, had boyfriends. This unintentionally served to “hide” their sexual orientations, making more conscious social coping mechanisms unnecessary.

Participants noted that the effects of hiding components of their gifted and LGBTQ identities were both positive and negative. In social environments where being out “makes you a target,” there are obvious benefits to hiding an LGBTQ identity. However, Nate expressed that when he lied about his sexuality, he was “completely and indifferently selling out everything that I had worked to define about myself...[and] inside I felt a bit worse.” Walter said that hiding his sexuality

...didn’t help me feel less different. It just made me feel like I was hiding a part of myself. My friends could tell...they tell me nowadays that I am so much more open and that they wish I had been this way in high school.

**Coming out.** Denying or hiding one’s giftedness (or LGBTQ identity) is at one end of Cross’s (1997) continuum of visibility for stigmatizing social situations. The other end of the continuum is telling the truth or, for LGBTQ students, coming out of the closet. Like choosing to hide their identities, choosing to come out was a conscious and strategic decision for the participants in this study. Some participants used the internet as a testing ground to come out to people without the risk of losing “real” friendships. Several students waited to get to know a peer before coming out “so there was no reason they couldn’t be friends with me” (Chris). Others chose to come out first to friends who were almost certainly “home runs” (Justin) or who were LGBTQ themselves because these individuals “wouldn’t judge” (Zack).

There are downsides to coming out, such as garnering “negative attention” from peers (Chris) and having doubts about how friends and family would react (Kelley). Nate, who only came out to a few peers, decided that he’d “rather not be judged and looked down upon than be out and proud.” However, he noted, “I don’t think that it’s a good thing...[that] it was more important to me to have the social tools than my own medium of expression.”

Being able to speak openly about and be accepted for their identities was very important to most participants. All but one participant was out to some extent in high school, and three participants regretted not coming out sooner. Justin, who did not come out until his senior year of high school, reflected, “Happiness was the best part about coming out... Even if I got picked on in middle school, even if I got slammed into the lockers and shit like that, at least part of the time I would have been happy.” Chris “was just tired of hiding and lying and having friends who I knew weren’t really friends.” Walter realized that “it felt a lot better as I told people... I’d been sort of keeping it inside, and... it just made me feel really relaxed to know that... they still loved me.”

Kelley and Kristen both went back into the closet in college after being out in high school. Kelley was relatively content, although she doubted she would stay closeted indefinitely “because that would get very stifling.” Kristen, on the other hand, felt a lot of distress about becoming closeted in order to participate in ROTC. She recalled, “I just needed a release. Alcohol and drugs helped me out a lot.”

**Teachers.** Most of the participants in this study formed close academic and personal relationships with certain teachers. “I felt like I held my own talking to adults, a lot better than I did with students, just because I couldn’t connect with them,” Chris

declared. “Teachers were good friends of mine,” agreed Nate. Certain teachers served as participants’ mentors and coaches, guiding them in their talent development. For example, one teacher encouraged Nate to express himself through art, and another wrote poetry collaboratively with Kristen. Teachers helped to guide their gifted and LGBTQ students socially and emotionally as well. Two thirds of the participants reported at least one close, personal relationship with a teacher, which helped them cope in middle school and high school.

Teachers acted as support systems and havens for students who were sometimes harassed for being LGBTQ. Adam remarked of a Latin teacher, “he’s kind of a mentor, just because he is just such a friendly person. It was always comfortable and fun going to his class and...knowing I won’t get teased here.” Justin’s Spanish teacher supported him during class but extended her support outside class as well, giving him a safe space to escape bullying and even encouraging him with a gift, the book Homosexuals In History. Walter had a teacher at his Catholic school who was so compassionate that he felt safe talking to her about his sexual orientation even though he knew her religion was against it. Some students came out to their teachers in order to hear “a different perspective” from someone who “isn’t going to judge you” (Nancy). Teachers helped students cope with their social differences by encouraging them to see their own potential and look beyond the confines of high school to the broader world.

**Family and friends.** Eight participants had strong social support from their families, and 11 had at least some support from close friends. In general, the students “really developed and cultivated the relationships that [they] had” (Chris) in order to cope with negative interactions and feelings of difference. Several participants reported talking

to parents or siblings to cope with their feelings. Another student, concerned about the reactions he would receive from his religious parents, first came out to a friend's parents, who acted as a "surrogate family before I was ready to tell my own family" (Justin).

Participants also coped by talking to friends who were supportive. They were cautious and anxious about their peers, choosing friends carefully (Walter) and only coming out to people they could trust (Monica). However, most students were pleasantly surprised to find that their friends, even the particularly religious ones, were supportive. Once they found supportive friends, participants felt "better because then I had people to talk to about it" (Nancy).

Three students relied heavily on one close friend. For example, Lisa's friend "would accept anything I did," while Jackie came out to one friend right away because "she's one of those people who knows me better than I know myself." Chris had a straight friend who constantly stood up to others in his defense.

Other participants had a whole group of supportive friends. Several students expressed that they made most of their friends in their advanced level classes "so [they] didn't feel different from them" (Nancy). Kelley expressed that she "connected with those people better than I probably would have [with] people who weren't as motivated," and Walter simply stated that he "liked people in gifted better." Other students made friends with other LGBTQ students who "would understand" (Jackie) and have common experiences. For example, when Lisa realized she was gay, she didn't feel "any different than I already was, because all my friends were the outcasts...the gay kids, the drug kids, and the hippies. It was a good mix."

Not all participants readily found positive social connections, however. Justin found that several groups of friends, particularly his church friends and sailing teammates, were not supportive of his gay identity, so he stopped associating with them when possible and developed closer relationships with his more supportive female friends. Until he became more comfortable with his giftedness and sexual orientation, Walter tried to isolate himself from all peers, figuring he couldn't "get hurt" if he didn't make friends. Because of his dual differences, Nate was also unable to find a peer group where he felt that he belonged. He explained that his peers in his IB classes were too heteronormative, but he didn't share similar interests with the group of LGBTQ students he found. As a result, he reported mostly spending time after school with his mother and sister instead of with friends.

**Internet.** Little research has been conducted about LGBTQ students' use of the internet to cope with their feelings of difference. However, 10 of the 12 participants in this study reported using the internet to form social connections or to research their identities.

**Social connections.** More than half the participants used the internet to form connections with other LGBTQ teens and the LGBTQ community at large. Through forums, blogs, and chat rooms, participants felt less isolated. They saw other people experiencing the same problems (Jackie), expressed feelings they "had been hiding inside for a really long time" (Zack), and met significant others (Chris). Social media sites served as test sites where participants were able to try on new identities (Chris) and practice coming out to friends "who can't actually hurt you" (Walter).



Participants also used media “to see that it’s possible to have a community, to not be the only person” (Justin). They immersed themselves in popular LGBTQ movies, books, and shows to feel connected to the larger LGBTQ community even though they were physically isolated from others (Jackie; Justin).

**Research.** Nine participants reported using the internet to research terms, identities, same-sex relationships, and the LGBTQ community. Nate believed that the internet was his “best way to sexually and socially define who I am and what I wanted.” Two participants were particularly voracious in their research. Jackie “didn’t want to offend somebody or offend myself by my own ignorance,” so she read widely in order to “be well informed” and be able to “talk about it intelligently.” Adam simply tried to “find out as much as [he] could about the community, just because [he has] an insatiable hunger to know stuff about everything.”

**Talent areas.** More than half the participants reported some area of talent that helped them cope with their dual differences. Four participants used writing—published novels (Nate), creative writing magazines (Nancy), poetry (Kristen), and short novellas (Kelley)—to express their feelings about being dually different. Nate recalled, “I found a lot of safety in my writing.” Several other participants found comfort in music. Adam explained, “if I’m stressed out or freaking out about something, I’ll go play piano and I’ll calm down and I can go back and do whatever it was I was doing before.” Finally, four participants developed their talents as leaders in student and community organizations. For example, beyond serving as president in his high school GSA, Adam participated as a youth leader with the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) to facilitate the development of GSAs beyond his own school. Working to make school

environments safer for LGBTQ students helped him cope. Justin, who was president and founder of a food bank club, also used leadership to cope with his feelings of difference. He recalled, “I just liked to be out front, like leading something made me feel good about myself... it gives you that satisfaction that you can move on and do better things; it really helps your confidence.”

**Focus on academics.** Participants who faced the most difficult social environments as gifted and LGBTQ individuals placed the strongest emphasis on academics. In the absence of social interactions, Nate focused on academics and his love of learning. Kristen appreciated her good grades despite their social repercussions because they “kind of kept me level sometimes” when her efforts were acknowledged by her school and her mother. She explained, “in the back of my mind I always knew that academics would get me further than them picking on me would.” Justin saw academic achievement as a tool to move beyond “the hell that was...high school.” Chris, too, treated school as a ticket to better things: “I really focused on my studies... it was like my studies were the only way out of that hellhole, so that’s what I did.”

### **Gifted and LGBTQ Identity Interactions**

Nine participants felt that their gifted identities and their LGBTQ identities interacted in some way. Two students described interactions through which their two identities compounded negatively. However, eight participants (including one who also expressed negative interactions) described positive interactions, such that their gifted identity helped them to better cope with their LGBTQ identity or vice versa.

**Negative interactions.** As the review of literature (Chapter 2) suggests, students who are different from their peers in more than one way often face compounded feelings

of difference. Two gifted and LGBTQ participants in this study did feel doubly different from their peers because of their dual stigmatizing identities. When discussing her choice to be out at school, Jackie recalled, “I didn’t want teachers and other students to react badly toward me, because I was already sort of disliked at my school because I was the smart kid.” Even more negatively, Walter attributed his extreme isolation and unhappiness to his dual identities: “The gifted identity started the severe self-hate and issues that I had with myself, and the gay identity just added onto it.”

**Positive interactions.** Despite feeling doubly socially stigmatized, most participants felt that their dual identities interacted positively. Previous research on the resiliency of gifted students may support this finding. Participants felt more accepted for their sexual orientations and gender identities in their advanced classes than in their general education classes, because “smarter spaces tend for me to be more welcoming spaces” (Chris). Kristen reflected, “In IB classes, we all looked at each other as equals. My sexuality wasn’t even a factor...Everyone had an open mind and no one really judged anyone. Outside of the class, it was just different.”

Participants also attributed their motivation, inquisitiveness, and opportunities to their giftedness. Kelley expressed that her giftedness was “probably one of the reasons why I’m motivated to learn more about myself, so that may have helped me to come to terms with [my bisexual identity].” Similarly, Kristen felt that “the gifted part of me caused me to be inquisitive and ask questions, and helped me define who I was, and then it helped me decide whether I wanted a label or not.”

Chris connected his experiences in gifted programming at Center for Talented Youth camps with his awareness of the “bigger, more interesting, accepting world out

there that [he] just needed to find,” which encouraged him to persevere through the teasing and harassment during school. Giftedness and LGBTQ identity also interacted to motivate participants to pursue post-secondary education. Justin felt that his gay identity “made me think that I was destined to be ambitious” and move past his unpleasant high school years. Finally, Zack believed that his giftedness gave him

a privilege that has helped me cope with being queer, because I’m here in college and I feel like I know I’m going to make a meaningful contribution to the world, and I’m smart and I’ve been praised for that my whole life... I’ve already been promised that I’m worth something...I feel like with being gifted, I have the tools to make my life what I want it to be.

### **Suggestions for Teachers and Schools**

Participants had many suggestions to improve school for gifted and LGBTQ students. One participant focused on gifted education, suggesting that teachers make learning more interesting and recognize that gifted students can underachieve (Lisa). However, all other participants focused on ways to improve school for LGBTQ individuals.

Eleven participants had suggestions for ways teachers could help students cope with their differentness. Most students wanted teachers to be available to talk. Kristen acknowledged that “the main goal of teachers is to teach” but pointed out that “when a teacher goes above and beyond” by any small gesture of support, it can make a student’s day. Teachers should “just be supportive... be there for your students no matter what, no matter who they are” (Monica). Half the participants also encouraged teachers to put a stop to homophobic comments. Justin requested, “If anyone says anything that’s even

remotely derogatory towards a queer student, you strike that down immediately... you make it incredibly clear that that is not language or behavior that is acceptable.”

Similarly, teachers should refrain from using homophobic language themselves. Walter pointed out that teachers who derogate LGBTQ students cause extreme psychological damage, but they’re “not making Christians or people who are homophobes feel like they’re less of a person by affirming gay people.” All teachers should receive at least rudimentary education in LGBTQ identities and issues, just as they are trained to deal appropriately with other minority groups. With estimates that from three to five percent of the population are LGBTQ (Ray, 2006), teachers must assume that they have at least one LGBTQ student in every class. Finally, teachers should acknowledge and avoid their own heteronormative biases while teaching, and teachers who are LGBTQ should come out publicly as role models for students.

Seven participants suggested curricular modifications that would more appropriately reflect the realities of LGBTQ students. They wanted sex education and history in particular to be more inclusive of LGBTQ individuals, but they also wanted everyday classes to be less heteronormative. By making curriculum more inclusive of LGBTQ identities, students feel less isolated and different from their peers. Ford (2011) advocates for multicultural curriculum because it provides “mirrors” for minority students to see themselves represented, but also because majority students need “windows” through which to learn about the experiences of others. Similarly, participants in the study felt that if all students were educated about sexual orientation and gender identity, there would be “no stigma around it, and no mystery and no misspeaking and no

ignorance, because people are afraid of what they don't understand" (Jackie). Curriculum that accurately represents LGBTQ individuals would benefit all students.

Participants also wanted policy changes for schools. Nate pointed out that social acceptance originates from policies and laws; without them, widespread attitude change is impossible. Participants suggested zero-tolerance policies for bullying and harassment and the removal of restrictive policies such as gendered dress codes and school dance rules that only permit opposite-sex dates. Policies should also permit or facilitate the establishment of Gay-Straight Alliances, despite potential parental opposition. Zack noted that school policy is "always struggling on that line between parents and what's right, and unfortunately those aren't always the same." GSAs are important for students to feel safe at school. They provide a space in which LGBTQ students can talk about their ideas and feelings and develop a community of support.

Finally, participants suggested that schools should provide resources for LGBTQ students. Guidance counselors must be specifically trained to deal with LGBTQ issues, and teachers and administrators should encourage students to seek counseling. Participants noted that at their schools, most guidance services were for students who were not passing their classes, but they wanted guidance as well. Educators should also provide resources to enable all students, even those from unsupportive families, to educate themselves about their identities. Such resources might include pamphlets, brochures, and links to community resources.

### **Summary**

Gifted and LGBTQ students use many of the same coping strategies as gifted students and LGBTQ students to deal with feeling different from their peers. The

participants interviewed in this study did not try to hide their giftedness, but they did commonly use strategies to hide their LGBTQ identity, in varying degrees, from their peers. Conversely, participants also “came out” by publicly announcing their identity as a way to cope. Some participants also denied their identity to themselves, downplayed the importance of popularity and peer acceptance, took part in social interactions, and relied on support from teachers, family, and friends. Finally, these students used the internet to build community and find resources, expressed themselves through developing their talents, and focused on academics as a tool to move beyond the social confines of high school. The participants largely reported that their gifted identities helped mitigate the negative social effects of their LGBTQ identities.

Teachers and schools can support gifted and LGBTQ students by being supportive and open to communication with students, punishing homophobic speech and actions, creating more inclusive and less heteronormative curricula, developing policies that support the rights of LGBTQ students, and providing resources to these students to guide them in their identity development.

## **Chapter 5: Summary, Recommendations, and Implications**

### **Summary and Discussion of Research**

This study used participant interviews to answer four research questions about being both gifted and LGBTQ in middle school and high school: What social coping strategies are used by gifted and LGBTQ adolescents? How often is each strategy used? How do intersections between giftedness and LGBTQ identity impact social coping? How can teachers and schools support and facilitate gifted and LGBTQ students' identity and talent development?

**What strategies are used to cope?** Gifted and LGBTQ participants reported using a number of strategies to cope with their feelings of difference. Most of their strategies minimized their feelings of differentness about being LGBTQ, not about being gifted. Although being gifted did make them feel different, they mostly saw it as a positive aspect of their identity and not something to hide or fix.

Students coped with being LGBTQ by denying their identity to themselves, hiding or trying to minimize their differences, and coming out and finding assurance within themselves. Participants found support in friends, family members, teachers, and, when available, Gay-Straight Alliances. They found social interaction through extracurricular activities and activism, downplayed the importance of popularity and peer acceptance, or kept to themselves. Students also focused on academics, used their talents in writing, music, and leadership to express themselves or compensate, and used the internet for information and social support.

**How often is each strategy used?** The most frequently used coping strategy reported was finding support in friends. All but one participant reported at least one close



friend or a group of friends who was completely accepting of the participants' identities. The importance of this coping strategy should not be overlooked. Research indicates that "peer acceptance is likely more fundamental to adolescent adjustment than is their gender conformity" (Smith & Leaper, 2005). Thus, even though participants did feel different from their peers because of their LGBTQ identities, acceptance from their peers allowed them to maintain their self esteem and cope with the social stressors of high school. Most participants also found acceptance from family members, although for three participants faced more mixed responses.

Interestingly, despite this high level of support, hiding was the third most commonly cited coping strategy. All participants made a conscious choice about when and the extent to which to come out to their family and peers, and 10 of the 12 reported hiding at least some aspects of their sexual orientations or gender identities. The only participants who did not try to downplay their identities were a bisexual girl who was dating a boy for most of high school and a student who was noticeably different because of his gender expression and had been teased since elementary school. Even participants who were totally "out" at school reported adjusting their mannerisms and censoring their speech in order to downplay their difference at school.

Men mentioned efforts to hide their identities more frequently than women (an average of 3.6 times per participant, compared to 1.8 times for women), and also used more extreme strategies. While women reported that they chose their words carefully around certain people and avoided conversations, men reported lying, altering their gender expressions, and even using homophobic slurs against others to hide their sexual orientations.

All but one student participated in extracurricular activities in high school. Some students used extracurriculars as “ambient communities” (Brown-Saracino, 2011), social spaces where they could be accepted for common interests regardless of LGBTQ identity, while others placed a stronger emphasis on their minority identity and chose to participate in organizations where they could be with other LGBTQ people. Such extracurricular activities included GSAs and drama, which is traditionally accepting of “non-traditional gender behaviors or sexual orientation” (Kerr & Cohn, 2001, p. 237). They also used extracurricular organizations to develop their talents as gifted students. Seven of the students participated in activities in their talent areas (writing, band, piano, chess club, etc.) and were leaders in their organizations. In accordance with previous research by McCreedy (2004), participants reported that participating in extracurricular activities and expressing their talents gave them a sense of control that was missing from other parts of their lives.

Ten students reported that they had supportive teachers who helped them cope with their differences, and eight described at least one specific teacher whose support dramatically impacted them. Students reported forming closer bonds with teachers than students in some cases because their peers were too immature. Nine students also reported being supported by their family. They were more able to cope with their feelings of differences when they felt accepted and able to talk about their problems.

Nine participants used the internet to research aspects of their LGBTQ identities. Such research helped students be more informed about themselves and about the LGBTQ community. Seven also used the internet socially to connect with other LGBTQ individuals.

According to research on other types of minority groups, minorities who develop strong, positive connections to their communities are “better able to accept themselves more fully and are less likely to internalize negative societal stereotypes” (Townsend, Thomas, Neilands, & Jackson, 2010, p. 276). Participants developed these community ties through online research and community-building and also by coming out, publicly or semi-publicly, as LGBTQ. This coping strategy was mentioned very frequently. Coming out helped students build connections with other LGBTQ people and facilitated their individual identity development. In fact, all but one participant chose to come out before the end of high school, and several participants expressed regrets that they did not come out sooner. By discussing their LGBTQ feelings and experiences with others, students were able to transition from being labeled to articulating their own identities.

Interestingly, Gay-Straight Alliances (GSAs), one of the most researched and discussed supports for LGBTQ students, were one of the least frequently mentioned coping strategies mentioned in this study. Most students did not have GSAs available in their high schools, and two participants who could have joined a GSA chose not to. The participants also used negative coping strategies mentioned in the literature, such as substance abuse and skipping school, but very infrequently. In fact, the most negative coping strategy that participants mentioned was lying, which they found to be harmful to their identity development. A different sample of gifted and LGBTQ students who do not attend such highly selective colleges might report using these strategies with different frequencies.

**How do intersections between giftedness and LGBTQ identity impact coping?** Several participants felt that their gifted identities and their LGBTQ identities interacted to magnify their feelings of difference. One student was unable to find a group of peers that was his intellectual equal and also accepting of his gay identity. However, most participants believed that their gifted and LGBTQ identities interacted positively. Students felt that their giftedness endowed them with characteristics and motivation that made coping with their LGBTQ identity easier.

Some of the most frequently mentioned coping strategies likely were influenced by participants' giftedness. For example, gifted participants were probably more motivated than most to research online in order to be well-informed about LGBTQ issues, which helped them solidify their identities. Close relationships with teachers, which participants found especially helpful, were probably facilitated by their giftedness as well. Gifted adolescents often form close bonds with teachers because they are more cognitively advanced than their peers (Silverman, 1997). These close relationships then helped the LGBTQ students feel safe and supported in their schools.

Students' extracurricular activities reflected their giftedness as well. They reported using their talents, such as writing and music, to express their feelings. One participant, a published author, wrote his second novel about his gay identity, "a commentary on fear... and insecurities, ...a perfect anthem of my experience" (Nate). Finally, students were gifted leaders who participated in school and community organizations. They used their leadership talents to feel successful, compensating for their negative social experiences due to their LGBTQ identities.

Participants also expressed that they felt more comfortable and more accepted for their LGBTQ identities among gifted peers, noting “a correlation between queer spaces and intellectual spaces” (Chris). In their advanced classes, both in school and in specialized programs for the gifted, students were able to think more broadly about social issues and the world outside their classrooms. These experiences, and their giftedness in general, helped participants to think ambitiously, reassured that they could move beyond their negative experiences in high school and make their mark on the world.

**How can teachers and schools support these students?** Teachers can support gifted and LGBTQ students by listening to students, recognizing their identities and visibly accepting them. Participants appreciated being able to go to teachers for comfort and support, but they were most moved by teachers who came to them. Small gestures, like giving a student a book about gay people or recognizing and positively acknowledging LGBT themes in homework assignments, made a huge difference to these students. Educators must be visible about supporting LGBTQ students, who need signals (“safe space” stickers, open invitations, etc.) to make informed judgments about which teachers are safe and welcoming.

Teachers should also make their classrooms and schools less heteronormative by never assuming students’ heterosexuality and by firmly rebuking all homophobic and transphobic comments, in and between classes. For some participants, certain teachers’ classroom became the only space in which they could feel safe from teasing. Finally, teachers should educate themselves about LGBTQ identities so that they are able to support students appropriately.

Schools can support these students through inclusive curricula, policies, and resources. LGBTQ students want curricula that reflect their lives. LGBTQ individuals should be included in developmentally appropriate ways in all subject areas, including history, sex education, and even English, just as other multicultural groups have been integrated into curriculum (Talburt, 2004). School policies must affirm LGBTQ students' rights. Students should be able to act out their gender expressions without fear of dress code repercussions. For example, one participant appreciated being able to attend his senior prom in drag, wearing a dress (Adam). Policies should also allow students to take same-sex dates to school dances. Schools should permit the formation of Gay-Straight Alliances, and they should *not* allow homophobic speech or bullying. Finally, schools should employ counselors who are specifically trained to support and provide resources to LGBTQ students.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

This research was a starting point from which to investigate the social coping strategies used by gifted and LGBTQ students. Further research is needed to provide more complete information about how to support these students.

**Mixed methods designs.** This study focused on in-depth interviews with 12 students at one university. The participants supplied deep, first-hand accounts of their experiences and coping strategies. However, the qualitative nature and small scope of the study make it difficult to generalize these results to a broader population of students. Therefore, future research should employ a larger sample and more reliable mixed methods designs. Results from this study could inform the creation of a survey

instrument, similar to Swiatek's (1995) Social Coping Questionnaire, that targets specific coping strategies used by gifted and LGBTQ students.

**Different populations.** Qualitative research among other similar populations could also produce interesting outcomes. For example, a study researching gifted and LGBTQ high school dropouts could reveal extremely different patterns of social coping than were found in this study of successful college students. By contrasting the positive and negative strategies used by both populations, educators can determine how to best guide students to choose positive social coping strategies.

**Use of the internet.** Another area of research might examine specific coping strategies explored in this study. For example, there is a surprising lack of research on the effects of the internet on social coping. Almost all of the participants in this study used the internet for research, social networking and community-building, or both. This coping strategy is likely to become more and more common as access to the internet permeates more broadly.

**Mentorships.** Research should also investigate the effects of mentors on this specific at-risk population. Effective mentors contribute to gifted students' academic, social, emotional, and vocational development (Casey & Shore, 2000), and they have been shown to be particularly effective for at-risk populations (e.g., Hébert & Olenchak, 2000). Most participants in this study recalled at least one caring teacher who encouraged them both academically and emotionally. Mentors can support students emotionally, guide them in the use of positive and adaptive coping strategies, and help them connect to resources.

This study suggests that mentorship is important for all gifted and LGBTQ students, but it could be an especially effective tool for students who are at risk of homelessness or dropping out of school, common outcomes for LGBTQ and gifted students respectively (Hansen & Johnston Toso, 2007; Ray, 2006; Renzulli & Park, 2000). Future research should consider the extent to which mentors can mitigate these negative outcomes. Research should also study whether teachers or mentors who identify as LGBTQ are more supportive or more effective for this population.

**School-wide interventions.** One interesting result of this research was that several participants reported feeling different from their peers as early as elementary school. In order to truly support LGBTQ students, educators must move from “interventions specifically aimed at LGB-Q identified students” to whole school interventions that challenge heteronormativity (Wilkinson & Pearson, 2009). Therefore, future research should investigate homophobic language, attitudes, and teasing at the elementary level. Researchers should also explore the effects of specific anti-bullying or tolerance curricula at the elementary level on these outcomes and on long-term results, such as homophobic bullying among high school students. Furthermore, studies should investigate whether there are interactions among homophobic attitudes, preventative curricula, and gifted students or programs. Such research would enable educators to select resources and strategies that produce environments that are the safest and most welcoming for gifted and LGBTQ students.

**Gifted and LGBTQ interactions.** Researchers can also continue to draw explicit links between characteristics of giftedness and the experiences of LGBTQ students. This study only very broadly explored the intersections between giftedness and LGBTQ



identity. For example, several participants in this study reported feeling very “extreme” and “sensitive” about their social situations, which are both characteristic of gifted students (Piechowski, 1999; Silverman, 1997). Treat (2006) has studied the different patterns of overexcitabilities among gifted and LGBTQ students, but no research has explored the effects of these overexcitabilities on students’ social feelings and experiences.

**Marginalized populations.** Finally, future research should continue to investigate specific subsets of the population who are the most marginalized, because their experiences are the least well-known. For example, very little literature on LGBTQ students deals specifically with transgender individuals. Only one participant in this study was transsexual, and his statements cannot be generalized to reflect the feelings and experiences of all transgender gifted students. Furthermore, different cultures, religions, and areas of the country perceive and treat LGBTQ individuals very differently. Research should include a wide variety of participants so that its outcomes are relevant for all students.

### **Implications for Gifted Education**

The results of this study have implications for both researchers and practitioners in the field of gifted education.

**Research contributions.** This study contributed to the existing body of literature in gifted education in the areas of dual exceptionality and social coping. A focus on twice exceptionality has been a recent trend in gifted education. Twice exceptional students are those who are gifted and who also have some form of disability. Research on the social aspects of twice exceptionality has focused on the ways that these students do not fit

entirely in either group because they are different from their peers with gifts and their peers with disabilities. Although being LGBTQ is not a disability, it is another type of difference that can affect students similarly. Therefore, this study adds a new perspective to the literature on twice exceptionality.

Existing research on social coping is international in scope, but it is limited in that it almost exclusively explores the coping strategies of gifted students who attend prestigious extracurricular programs or academies for the gifted. Most students in this study attended public middle and high schools, and none attended schools specifically designed for the gifted, which more accurately represents the realities of most gifted students.

Furthermore, most literature on social coping assumes that all gifted students experience their giftedness in similar ways. Some research (e.g., Foust et al., 2006) explores differences in social coping strategies by age and gender, but largely, research and practices in gifted education emphasize the similarities among gifted students over their intra-group differences. This study acknowledges the different experiences and multifaceted identities of gifted students who belong to more than one minority group. By exploring the social coping of adolescents who are both gifted and LGBTQ, this study adds a new perspective to the existing literature on social coping.

**Application to practice.** This study can help practitioners in gifted education by giving them insight into the lives of their gifted and LGBTQ students. Although students who are both gifted and LGBTQ are a small minority, teachers, administrators, gifted coordinators, and counselors have a responsibility to support diversity and to attend to the social and emotional needs of all of their students (NAGC, 2010). Because of their dual

differences, gifted students who are also LGBTQ are at-risk for social alienation and isolation. The first-hand accounts presented in this research can help educators better understand and empathize with the experiences and feelings of gifted and LGBTQ students.

Furthermore, because gifted students are often more androgynous and less gender-normative than their average-ability peers (Kerr & Cohn, 2001; Tolan, 1997), they may face some of the same issues as gifted and LGBTQ students even if they are heterosexual. Therefore, it is even more important for teachers of the gifted to create safe and welcoming learning environments for their students.

The participants' suggestions for the improvement of teachers and schools are practical and implementable. This research provides an impetus for educators to create safer school climates by establishing policies and classroom cultures that promote compassion and respect for all. As McCready (2004) asserts, if doubly different queer youth "are willing to risk harassment and abuse by openly identifying as gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender," then educators must "be willing to risk stepping out of our comfort zones to unravel the complexities of their lives" (p. 142).

Educators can and should work to improve their school environment to support LGBTQ students. However, it is important that teachers and counselors also allow gifted and LGBTQ students to "articulate their needs, desires, and identities" for themselves (Talbert, 2004, p. 121). By learning about the coping strategies that gifted and LGBTQ students are already using to cope with social stigma, educators can help guide their students toward healthier coping strategies.

The group of successful college students interviewed in this study used largely positive, goal-oriented strategies like focusing on academics and extracurricular activities. These strategies support gifted students' talent development and help adolescents reach their potential. Other social coping strategies, including hiding or denying aspects of their identities, are emotionally stressful and painful for students. Educators and counselors need to be aware of both positive and negative strategies so that they can be proactive about guiding students toward positive coping mechanisms. Only then can gifted and LGBTQ students reach their potential as happy, productive, and well-educated members of society.

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Table 1

*Participant Demographics*

Pseudonym	Age	Sexual Orientation	Gender Identity	Realized LGBTQ	Came Out
Nate	18	Gay	Man	11	15
Lisa	21	Gay	Woman	14	14
Nancy	19	Bisexual	Woman	11	16
Jackie	19	Queer/Lesbian	Woman	17	17
Adam	18	Gay	Man	14	15
Kristen	20	Lesbian	Woman	14	14
Chris	20	Gay	Man	12	13
Kelley	18	Bisexual	Woman	15	15
Justin	21	Gay	Man	10	17
Walter	22	Gay	Man	12	16
Monica	20	Pancurious	Woman	14	14
Zack	20	Femmesexual/ Lesbian	Transsexual/ Man/Genderqueer	12	19



## Appendix A: Education IRC Exemption

This is to notify you on behalf of the Education Internal Review Committee (EDIRC) that protocol EDIRC-2011-12-01-7624-vhhutcheson titled Dealing with Dual Differences: Social Coping Strategies of Gifted Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer Adolescents has been EXEMPTED from formal review because it falls under the following category(ies) defined by DHHS Federal Regulations: 45CFR46.101.b.1, 45CFR46.101.b.2.

**Work on this protocol may begin on 2011-12-15 and must be discontinued on 2012-12-15.**

Should there be any changes to this protocol, please submit these changes to the committee for determination of continuing exemption using the Protocol and Compliance Management channel on the Service tab within myWM ( <http://my.wm.edu/> ).

Please add the following statement to the footer of all consent forms, cover letters, etc.:

THIS PROJECT WAS FOUND TO COMPLY WITH APPROPRIATE ETHICAL STANDARDS AND WAS EXEMPTED FROM THE NEED FOR FORMAL REVIEW BY THE COLLEGE OF WILLIAM AND MARY PROTECTION OF HUMAN SUBJECTS COMMITTEE (Phone 757-221-3966) ON 2011-12-15 AND EXPIRES ON 2012-12-15.

You are required to notify Dr. Ward, chair of the EDIRC, at 757-221-2358 (EDIRC-L@wm.edu) and Dr. Kirkpatrick, Chair of the PHSC at 757-221-3997 (PHSC-L@wm.edu) if any issues arise during this study.

Good luck with your study.

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COMMENTS

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No comments available

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BASIC INFO

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**Title:** Dealing with Dual Differences: Social Coping Strategies of Gifted Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer Adolescents

**Start Date:** 2011-12-15

**Year Number:** 1

**Years Total:** 1

**Campus:** Main

**Committee(s):** EDIRC

**Cc: Emails:**

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PI INFO  
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**W&M UserID:** clties

**Full Name:** Carol Tieso

**Role:** Faculty

**Department:** Gifted Education

**Day/Work Phone:** 757-221-2461

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**W&M UserID:** vhhutcheson

**Full Name:** Ginny Hutcheson

**Role:** Graduate Student

**Department:** Gifted Education

**Day/Work Phone:** 703-989-5895

**Ext:**

**Alternate Phone:**

Protocol modified by tjward on 2011-12-15 20:04:53

Thomas J. Ward, Ph.D.  
Associate Dean for Academic Programs  
School of Education  
The College of William and Mary  
P.O. Box 8795  
Williamsburg, VA 23187-8795  
(757) 221-2358 (voice)  
(757) 221-2293 (fax)

## Appendix B: Interview Questions

1. How old are you? What year did you graduate from high school?
2. How would you identify yourself in terms of sexual orientation and gender identity?
3. When did you first realize you were L/G/B/T/Q (come out to yourself)?
4. When did you first come out to others? Were you out to your peers in middle school? High school? College?
5. Were you formally identified as gifted in school? Did you take gifted classes (including honors, AP, or IB)?
6. Did you feel different from your peers because of your identity as L/G/B/T/Q?
7. Did you feel different from your peers because of your giftedness?
8. How do you feel being L/G/B/T/Q/gifted impacted your social life?
9. How did you cope with feelings of differentness?
  - a. Friends? Teachers? Gay Straight Alliance? Online community? Extracurriculars? Academics? Being closeted? Others? Research?
  - b. Did you use these strategies consciously or unconsciously?
  - c. Do you think each strategy was effective? Was it beneficial or harmful to you?
10. Did your feelings of differentness and the ways you coped with them change from middle school to high school? From high school to college?
11. (If in separate gifted classes/settings) Did you feel different levels of acceptance in your gifted classes compared to your general education classes?

12. What recommendations would you make to teachers or to schools to make it better for students like you?
13. Is there anything else you would like to tell me? Do you have any questions for me?

## Appendix C: Initial Email Contact

To: [bcc: 16 interested potential participants]

From: [vhutcheson@email.wm.edu](mailto:vhutcheson@email.wm.edu)

Hello,

Thank you so much for expressing interest in my Master's thesis project, "Dealing with Dual Differences: Social Coping Strategies of Gifted Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer/Questioning Adolescents." I briefly introduced my project at a Lambda meeting, but here's a little bit more information: I am working towards my M.A.Ed. in Curriculum and Instruction--Gifted Education and for my culminating thesis project, I am studying the experiences of LGBTQ-identified individuals who are also gifted. The first phase of my study involves interviewing college students about their experiences in middle school and high school, with a focus on strategies used to cope socially during adolescence. If you choose to participate, I'll meet with you and ask you some questions. The interview will be audio recorded, but your name will not be associated with the recording or its transcription in any way. The interview should take about thirty minutes.

If you would like to participate in my study, and/or if you have any questions or concerns, please reply to this email ([vhutcheson@email.wm.edu](mailto:vhutcheson@email.wm.edu)) or call me at [\(703\)989-5895](tel:(703)989-5895) to let me know!

Thank you,

Ginny Hutcheson

M.A.Ed. 2012

## Appendix D: Informed Consent (Participant Copy)



The College of

# WILLIAM & MARY

School of Education

P.O. Box 8795

Williamsburg, VA 23187-8795

**Investigators:** Virginia Hutcheson, Master's in Gifted Education, The College of William and Mary

**Study Title:** Dealing with Dual Differences: Social Coping Strategies of Gifted and Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer Adolescents

1. Invitation to Participate in a Research Study  
You are invited to participate in this research study regarding the experiences and social coping strategies of gifted and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) adolescents.
2. Purpose of the Research Study  
The purpose of this study is to learn more about the middle school and high school social experiences of gifted and LGBTQ identified students and the strategies these students use to cope with feeling different. This study is also a fulfillment of the Master's Thesis requirement for the Gifted Education Program at the College of William and Mary.
3. Description of Procedures  
Participation in this study involves talking with the researcher about your social experiences in middle school and high school. The interview will be audio recorded and transcribed, and it should take about 30 minutes.
4. Risks and Inconveniences  
You may feel some discomfort or stress while discussing your experiences as an LGBTQ identified person due to the socially sensitive nature of the topic.
5. Benefits  
The primary benefit of participation in this study is the opportunity to contribute to research about the experiences and social coping strategies of gifted and LGBTQ middle school and high school students.
6. Confidentiality/Anonymity  
All interview data will be confidential. The audio recording and transcription of your interview will be assigned a number and a pseudonym and will not be directly connected with your name. There will be NO identifying characteristics presented in the final report.
7. Voluntary Participation  
You do not have to be in this study if you do not want to. If you agree to be in the study, but later change your mind, you may drop out at any time. There is no pressure to answer any of the interview questions or complete the survey. There are no penalties or consequences of any kind if you decide that you do not want to participate. Results of the study will be made available to any participant upon request.
8. Do You Have Any Questions?  
I will be happy to answer any questions that you may have about this study. You may contact the researcher, Virginia Hutcheson, at 703-989-5895 or [vhutcheson@email.wm.edu](mailto:vhutcheson@email.wm.edu); the thesis advisor, Carol Tieso, at 757-221-2461 or [clties@wm.edu](mailto:clties@wm.edu); or the College of William and Mary Internal Review Board representative, Tom Ward, at 757-221-2358 or [tom.ward@email.wm.edu](mailto:tom.ward@email.wm.edu). If you would like to receive information about the results of this study, please contact the researcher at [vhutcheson@email.wm.edu](mailto:vhutcheson@email.wm.edu).

Thank you,

**Virginia Hutcheson**

**M.A.Ed. Student**

**Education**

**Gifted Education**

**311 Cary St.**

**Williamsburg, VA 23185**

**Phone: (703) 989-5895**

**Email: [vhutcheson@email.wm.edu](mailto:vhutcheson@email.wm.edu)**

**Carol L. Tieso, Ph.D.**

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THIS PROJECT WAS FOUND TO COMPLY WITH APPROPRIATE ETHICAL STANDARDS AND WAS EXEMPTED FROM THE NEED FOR FORMAL REVIEW BY THE COLLEGE OF WILLIAM AND MARY PROTECTION OF HUMAN SUBJECTS COMMITTEE (Phone [757-221-3966](tel:757-221-3966)) ON 2011-12-15 AND EXPIRES ON 2012-12-15.

## Appendix D: Informed Consent (Researcher Copy)

**Informed Consent**

The general nature of this study entitled "Dealing with Dual Differences: Social Coping Strategies of Gifted and Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer Adolescents," conducted by Virginia Hutcheson under the supervision of Dr. Carol Tieso, has been explained to me. I understand that I will be asked to answer questions about my experiences as a gifted and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer identified individual in middle school and high school, which may cause me feelings of discomfort or stress. My participation in this study should take a total of about 30 minutes. I understand that my responses will be confidential and that my name will not be associated with any results of this study. I know that I may refuse to answer any question asked and that I may discontinue participation at any time. I also understand that any grade, payment, or credit (include one of these situations, if applicable) for participation will not be affected by my responses or by my exercising any of my rights. Potential risks resulting from my participation in this project have been described to me. I am aware that I may report dissatisfactions with any aspect of this experiment to the Chair of the Protection of Human Subjects Committee, Dr. Lee Kirkpatrick, 757-221-3997 or [lakirk@wm.edu](mailto:lakirk@wm.edu). I am aware that I must be at least 18 years of age to participate. My signature below signifies my voluntary participation in this project, and that I have received a copy of this consent form.

Name:

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Date:

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Signature:

Interview 2: Nate

Appendix E: Interview Transcripts

When did you graduate from high school and how old are you?

Spring of 2011; 18

How do you identify in terms of sexual orientation and gender identity?

Gay

When did you first realize that you were gay?

When I was young, probably around the age of 11 or 12

How did that go?

I realized it on my own. No one told anything to me; no one said anything. I kind of added it together based on how I was feeling toward people, guys that I knew, the value of women to me, etc. There was a moment, it was in the evening, I just kind of figured that out. It was very scary, and I wasn't very comfortable with it; I didn't know what to think about it, so I kind of put it on the back burner for probably like a year or two until I started making more sense of it. When I first figured it out, I didn't lie to myself, I kind of knew, but I was very afraid about it. It was not the most settling realization, but I was pretty sure of myself.

When did you first start to come out to other people?

I believe that was my freshman year of high school, so I was 15. Freshman year.

Who did you come out to?

The first person I came out to was a cousin on my mom's side of the family. I'm half Greek and half Indian, so this is my Greek side, which is super liberal and very social and chill. My Indian side is very uptight and conservative, and we'll talk about that later. But that was my cousin, and the first person in my immediate family was my sister, and then very slowly from there on out I started having very personal one-on-one conversations with people in my family. Very few people in high school. No middle school, because that wasn't really happening yet, but very few people in high school knew about it. If they did it was when I was about to graduate as a senior or after, so no presence of that there, and that was very intentional. But my cousin, then my sister, a few other people on my Greek side, then a few other people in my immediate family. But there's not one family that all knows. It's still very mix and match. I definitely analyze it to be very personal one-on-one conversations. It's not like a group outing yet.



Interview 2: Nate

When you did come out to people at high school was it intentionally?

Yes, more or less. There were some people who kind of pried at me a little bit, and I made what I wanted to make of that. Some people really didn't care, and I would just be like, "screw that." Some people who were being unpleasant about it, I would lie many times about things like that. It was not very settling. I come from Atlanta, Georgia. I'm from the city of Atlanta but I went to school in this little suburban conservative rural pocket outside of the city, so you can probably imagine. We'll talk about that obviously, but it was not the most settling environment for that. People at school, it kind of depends on the person. People in my family I definitely came out to on my own decision, with the exception of one person, my father. I definitely want to share that with you. That's what that was all about. With my family it was my own decision. If there's anyone who did ask specifically, I was very dismissive, usually.

Were you formally identified as gifted in school?

Yes.

When or how?

We had this gifted "PROBE" program in my elementary school and you would take this little 100 question test about being creative and then you were certified to be in gifted courses or PROBE courses. Then I went to middle school and we had MYP, which is part of the IB program. That was 6<sup>th</sup> grade through 10<sup>th</sup> grade for my school, so starting in middle school I was taking a gifted foreign language, English, higher level classes.

In high school it was IB?

Yes. I did the IB diploma, the full load, starting junior year.

For IB obviously it was mostly separate from non-gifted peers. Was middle school also like that, with separate classes?

More or less. If I remember correctly, I could not get into a gifted class in sixth grade because you had to apply and I applied late and the spots were full, so it had nothing to do with my credentials, if you will, but I didn't get into that. I was in a gifted math and gifted English, but everything else was with the whole pool. But in MS and definitely HS, there were high level classes that were reserved for those students that were separate.

Even though people didn't know you were gay in middle school and high school, mostly, did you feel different for being gay? Did you feel alienated at all?

## Interview 2: Nate

Definitely, definitely. People may or may not have known. People who didn't know me well said things about me, so they were probably acting on their intuition, which is whatever. I had a very secure... I was very quiet, I was very focused on academics. I didn't really have many social skills, so I wasn't unpleasant to anyone, but I didn't talk to a lot of people, so things were pretty quiet in middle school. HS, things were quiet and by 10<sup>th</sup> grade I started getting control of my life and my own social skills, and I was very confident. I was the most confident in junior year, and senior year I sort of evolved to be strong with myself. That probably has to do with sexuality in a lot of ways because I had to understand how to interpret it and how it would be viewed in the setting of my high school. Definitely though I did feel anxious about that. There was a lot of really offensive talk across people, in the gym, in the locker room, whatever. I was never part of those things directly, but those things were very disturbing and distressing to me, especially in the moment when you're pursuing your sexuality or trying to figure out who you are, especially sixth, seventh grade, notably very difficult. I was never confronted. People liked me, people didn't put me to waste, but I sensed a lot of tension. I sensed that people were talking about me behind my back, some people made assumptions, so they would... Not that it's their business, and they don't know me enough to confront me about it, but I was aware of that talk and that conversation. There were definitely people who didn't know and still don't know. It was never a widely regarded subject for me.

Did you feel different from your peers for being gifted?

I never really thought of things that way. If I did, it would have been later in high school when I realized that gifted students, these students who I'd been working with so long through my IB program, you know these people since the beginning of time being in a public school. I think I liked that. I found that being a little more appreciative, understanding, well informed, and that may have been a desirable thing. It's had to answer that question because I can also look at negative feelings toward my gifted classes and gifted students. A lot of them were very upper middle class white people, very conservative. There wasn't much knowledge or understanding of homosexual things, LGBT lifestyle, whatever. Even though I wasn't out to them, I felt suppressed in terms of making my own foothold in my identity. Another interesting thing would be there were two gay people who were out in my school, both men, and there were two out of four thousand students that I was around. It's a good view of how it was difficult to find my place, and those two students were not in gifted classes so I didn't really associate with them until now, I associate with one out of high school. Another thing, gay people who ever pursued me or talked to me I didn't know them well because they weren't in my gifted classes and I wasn't around them. There were never any people in my gifted classes who came out to me or I knew of being gay in a way that directly affected me.

## Interview 2: Nate

There was a gay guy in the year above me, so he graduated in 2010, and I'm pretty sure he was gay and I'm pretty sure he knew about me too, but he was not very accommodating. That's another thing I really didn't like, is that gay people that I knew. I don't really know how to measure this, but I'm kind of a big believer that gay people get vibes about other gay people, like a moment where you're like, "yeah," they know about me, I know about them. I don't know that it exists, but I kind of think that it can happen. The thing I don't like was in high school, when I had moments like that and I had this feeling that he knew about me, he wasn't welcoming or different toward me, which makes sense and seems balanced, but then appreciation of gay people and support I did not get a lot of, especially gay people who were out. That was very frustrating and a little bit lonesome because it was very important to me to have support through people and it wasn't going to be through my very heteronormative straight peers and my classes, and other people didn't seem very receptive.

So what kind of thing did you do to cope with that, to find community or support or acceptance?

It was a really really really rigorous thing for me. The first step in my mind was securing my sexuality in the eyes of my family. My family background is very close, very sharing, very open, specifically my Greek side that I mentioned, my mother's side is very nurturing of difference, very open minded. My Indian side is not as much. It's very conservative, a little judgmental. As early as my grandfather, my dad's dad, he had an arranged marriage so you can see how that seeps into my family. Very traditional Indian. Another thing about the Indian culture of my family is that you share everything with your family everywhere, and I don't like that for my personalness, so there's a lot of struggle with having to deal what that meant, and to this day I haven't come out to anyone on my Indian side of my family, except for when my dad kind of talked to me about something. Back to your question, the first thing was securing my identify and my family. There was no club, no organization, no group of people that I knew that were gay. I learned about a group of bisexual, a little bit gothic, a little darker people. This was just a vibe that people got about them, and I got to know one of the guys there, and I met his friends, and this is probably one of the most significant things about high school socially is that I met his friends and they were very different. They weren't in higher level classes, and coming from my background I was like, nice people, and I don't judge people, so I was like, "that's nice," but then I was also like, "I don't know if this is my group; I don't know if I have similar interests." And I was kind of conflicted about what it was that I liked and didn't like, but I think that was like a bisexual group, I'm pretty sure, so that was supportive and interesting. I didn't have any tools for having a very comfortable way to come out, discovering tools about what to deal with your sexuality. I didn't have any class, any conversations about gay being all right. That was definitely something that I

## Interview 2: Nate

lacked. However, I was very wrapped in my own understanding of myself, which I think kind of saved me in the end, because I didn't say, "I'm good to go, I know who I am, what's around me." I didn't do that until toward the end of junior, senior year, mostly senior year, when I started to feel a little interested in those friends who I was friends with for so long who couldn't really meet my interests. Not sexual interests, but interests like understand those things and be supportive, so I never came out to them and they were never very helpful to me.

So would you say prior to junior year it was more important to try and fit in and hide who you were?

Yeah. I focused really on fitting in, working with students, getting my ass through high school, whatever I needed to do. In terms of sexuality and its presence there, it really wasn't. It was focused on me and myself and reaching toward my family. The big year for coming out of people in my family was mostly junior year. It started freshman year, but junior year was when my brother was coming back home, let's talk to him... that's when it started to become more of a thing. But that's correct, I definitely focused more on fitting in in high school.

Junior and senior year you sort of dissociated from that group of friends?

Junior year was a transition period where I started coming out to my family more, I started to become more confident with myself, and plus I found very lacking and undesirable things in my friends I had who couldn't really be open. They weren't accepting, they weren't understanding.

So did you find new friends, or just do your own thing?

Honestly, I did my own thing in terms of sexuality. I didn't talk to anyone about it except family members and a few close friends who were outside of that very cliquey environment that were my friends. They were very cliquey. I just thought about that. I definitely kept sexuality to myself and I focused on those friends so I had friends. That sounds really horrible, but that was my motivation. What else are you going to do? For me I didn't really feel accepted enough at all anyway, so I focused on what superficial matters, and I was aware that they were superficial, I just went to having friends that I could rely on in terms of academics and people who if they did organize something as friends they would include me in. I'm sure a lot of it comes down to being confident but I didn't have that kind of confidence socially until I started figuring out about myself. It was a very quiet evolution because it all really linked back to a lot of sexuality. That was the thing that kind of came into my view at a younger age and needed to be dealt with, and I did it all on my own until I was ready to share it with other people.

## Interview 2: Nate

What kinds of things did you do to focus on other things? What did you focus on? You implied that your group of friends was mostly in the gifted classes also, so a focus on academics?

Focus on academics, classes, projects. I was very involved in sports in high school, so I did cross country for all four years, track for two of four years, tennis for one more semester, and then there was one semester that I didn't do anything because I was working on my novel. I was very involved where I didn't really feel alone, I just couldn't really be met in terms of sexual orientation. Furthermore, my cross country team was like my group of friends outside of school and they were very heteronormative. There were a lot of racists in that team, very conservative people, not very judgmental. Sophomore year I had a horrible year in cross country because I told someone outside of cross country that I had a crush on this dude on my team, and she told people, and it was a disaster. That was probably my worst semester of high school, the fall and spring, end of fall, early spring, all of winter of sophomore year.

So how did you deal with that situation?

I was really alone. I was really unhappy. I didn't have anyone who I felt could take care of me, and the idea of a boyfriend or someone who cared for me, could understand, that was like some dream off in the distance, and honestly still kind of is now, which is kind of funny. It was horrible. I found a lot of peace in myself. That was really pivotal because I came out to my mom, so that's when I realized that I needed someone on the inside. I started to shape this idea that I told myself totally honestly and blatantly that if my family won't accept it, that's fucked up. I'm dealing with that now. So that's when I came out to my mom. I found a lot of safety in my writing. That's when... I was signed as an author in 2006, so that was 2008-2009. Based in Georgia. I was working on my second project, and that was a commentary on fear and social shit and insecurities, and that really is a perfect anthem of my experience working the gay lifestyle and defining yourself, so I found a lot of peace in that, something I owned and could control and deal with on my own. I'll be honest, I didn't have a very social lifestyle. I worked really hard at school, I got up early, I loved going to school, I loved working hard, I'd go home and sometimes do homework. If I didn't do homework I'd hang out with my mom. I'd hang out with my sister. Sometimes I'd go see other friends who didn't go to my school. There were neighborhood kids far below my grade that was like busy time with people. I didn't have a very secure group of social friends that I relied on all the time. I had a lot of really good friends junior year who I did a lot of things with outside of my IB diploma program, so that's definitely a comment on how my gifted education had a big effect on my social life. They were not open and very heteronormative so I didn't come out to them.

The gifted ones?

## Interview 2: Nate

Yes. That was IB diploma. They were very accessible as friends. It was really an ebb and flow. Back to the whole thing about cross country, that came out and it was a disaster but I coped with that with family and myself. I think about that too. I don't think about these things that much because they're very sensitive and private and I struggled a lot through identity and I had very little. At this age I'm very appreciative of my family because they were always there for me, they were always accepting. That's the number one thing. I'm so lucky. I think about how lucky I am that I have that tool. People don't have that tool. People are kicked out by their family and then they figure their shit out and it can be horrible. It's really bad. So I'll tell you, I'm very very lucky to have my family.

Otherwise, it was not very successful. I could say things that were kind of sensitive or emotional, not romantic, but emotional toward other guys I knew that I was close with and they'd make fun of me or make some shitty comment to me. That was just very unchill. I was alone all the time. I did homework and I was with my family and I went out occasionally but I didn't go to football games, I didn't hang out with all the popular kids, because they were oppressive to me. This is how I look at high school now, and going through education, is that it was not an easy experience. I worked so hard to make sure that I was okay with myself. It took so long, so much energy, dealing with loneliness, dealing with questions about yourself, not being able to tap into social networks to figure out who you are, which is a big part of life, I believe. Very difficult, having to do that. I look back on that and it's very disturbing because I successfully got through it, but it was not a good thing. It's not a healthy thing, so I'm very sensitive toward that because I definitely suffered.

Did you have any supportive or unsupportive relationships with teachers?

I really liked teachers. I really like education, I really like teachers. Teachers were good friends of mine. They were mature, understanding, open. Not all of them. My seventh grade English teacher really unlocked a lot of things in me about confidence and expression, art. Those were very early signs. This was before I was signed to write, but she was a major influence in terms of confidence. I never came out to any teachers. I don't remember, but I want to say that I remember that teacher of mine in seventh grade making a comment about gay people that was very quelling about social concerns. I think she made some comment about being yourself or whatever. Now I wonder if she said that because she wondered about me and what I wanted out of life or whatever, but I remember she was very helpful. Teachers were a big deal to me, and it was really important that I had good relationships with teachers. There was one in seventh grade, one in eighth grade. When I got into high school it was not so much. My ninth grade geometry teacher, he was a big help to me socially. I'd bring my questions to him, I'd do work, and I'd have someone who really liked me. I almost want to say I formed better relationships with teachers than with students, because I was very mature beyond my

## Interview 2: Nate

years. Someone would make some little shitty comment about a group of people, or be kind of rude to someone else, and those things were very disturbing. They weren't easy things to deal with. I didn't find them funny. I didn't find judgment okay. I was very sensitive. I was above that, so I suffered if I was around it. I was very clear on those boundaries, especially those years that I explained when I started coming to terms with myself and becoming confident in myself. It was definitely a changing period on its own.

Did you look online to find support groups or information or anything?

That's a good question. I didn't look for support groups or social tools. In the environment that I come from, defining sexual things and a homosexual lens, I had to discover that on my own and discover how that worked, so I would research those things or try and figure out what homosexual relationships were. How does homosexual sex work? I don't know anything about that. Who's going to tell me about that? No one. So it's something you discover for yourself. That came around at a really early age, to be honest. I think I started discovering homosexuality also when I discovered that I was interested in homosexual pornography, shit like that. You discover it. Those are the tools that I looked for. That was my best way to sexually and socially define who I am and what I wanted. But not any interest groups or society, I didn't know of anything like that.

Most of the strategies you've talked about seem pretty positive. Did you experience anything that was more negative as an escape mechanism?

I did a lot of lying. I lied about my sexuality. That was a coping mechanism. I don't want to sound like I'm yelling at you; I'm yelling at the world, to be honest. That was a way to justify my presence in the eyes of my friends, by completely and indifferently selling out everything that I had worked to define about myself. Period, end quote, you know? That was definitely a horrible coping mechanism, but it was the easiest and most simple way to deal with that, and to be welcome by friends.

Do you think that was detrimental to yourself to have to lie like that?

Yeah, I definitely do. Inside I felt a little bit worse. I like to think I'm a very strong, observant, personal, independent man so I was aware of that impact on me, and I didn't deny things. Someone on my cross country team sophomore year, after that rumor thing when someone blew my secret, after that someone asked me if I was gay and I was like, "oh, this person on the team is gay and we're very chill with him," and I really do believe that was a nice guy trying to be outward and accepting, but I was so fucking turned off by all the invasive behavior, and I know a lot of people on the team who weren't accepting, and as long as they could walk on someone who didn't seem socially confident they would, and that was their game, so I lied to him, and denied it, and said, "oh, no, I'm not,

## Interview 2: Nate

I'm straight," and he was like, "are you sure? I don't want you to worry about things like that? I promise, it's very okay," and I was like, "Oh no, I promise, if I were gay I would tell you." I was very convincing. I was *very* convincing. I was very good at lying. I would never cope by putting gay people down. That's one thing I never did. So person A is like, "I hate faggots," person B is like, "I hate dykes," and I'm there and I'm like, I'm not going to fucking say shit. I never put other people down because I'm uncomfortable with that. That was against my principles as a person. And people would say those things, by the way, and that was a very horrible influence. My most negative coping mechanism would be lying, being untruthful.

What would you have wanted to be in place in high school and middle school? What support mechanisms do you wish had been there?

I wish that teachers would tell you, in whatever way they want to tell you, that being gay is alright, and being gay is a common thing in the world. I didn't know it was a common thing. That's a serious issue. I wish that there was awareness of gay and lesbian lifestyles. There are little kids, younger than ten, who will say, "Being gay is weird." They know about that shit already, and they're raised by their families. Since education is weighed importantly, it needs to be structured accordingly so people are aware and not ignorant about what's going on in the world. How crushed I felt when I figured out that I was gay to myself and I didn't really feel like I had a place to belong anywhere. I didn't see some boyfriends walking around holding hands I was like, "Wow, I kind of want to be a part of that, what do I do?" That didn't exist, are you kidding me? It wasn't secure like that. As a subject, things like sex ed is a big debate, and a lot of insecurities about that in schools and families, and I don't know, but I would suggest that there should be... I don't like the disdain, hype, and judgment around two women having sex or two men having sex. I don't like that there's crap around that, because it's also a way of life, and it's a medium for expression, and it's a medium through which emotions and passion can be carried. I really believe that. I wouldn't draw the line at anything else. I think there should be a place for that. I want students who make homosexual accusations, bad humor, judgment, I want those students to be punished for making those comments. That's not okay. And if they're not punished, they think it's okay. It's a very simple universe. It's all reinforced by the environment around you. I'm a big believer in the personal component, but also in a little shitty place like middle school, where everyone's trying to fight for themselves and they don't know who the hell they are, there needs to be a yes, no, okay, no filter through which social interactions should be moderated, especially in a public school where all different walks of life come together. If you want to talk about a private Christian school, I don't think those things are really accepted there either, but they need to be made into part of what the world is. When I mentioned how lucky I feel about my family and myself, I'm really fortunate to be able to have my own personal motivation to



## Interview 2: Nate

keep myself safe and comfortable, in myself, not in society, but with my family and myself. For students who don't have those things, they need protection. That doesn't really exist, back in middle school it didn't for me at all. High school was a little bit more, but put in classes with my friends, those are who you associate yourself with, and you don't have a way to meet other people anyway. Organizations, yeah, but then people weren't really out anyway, so there need to be tools for that. I don't know, it's very complicated. If you were asking me, should there be a gay/lesbian alliance in high school, I'd say I don't know if I'd be in it, because there are so many people who wouldn't go, and so many people who judge the people who do go. Where do you curtail that part of social interaction which could keep you safe but not risk you being attacked by other people? I really kept a lot of sexuality things to myself because I didn't want to... I'd rather not be judged and looked down upon than be out and proud and with people in that way. Which I think in the end is a negative thing.

You don't think what's a good thing?

I don't think that it's a good thing that instead of coming out and making your mark on the world as a gay person, you'll just kind of mingle with your friends and please your friends. I don't think that's a good thing, but I did that because it was more important to me to have the social tools than my own medium of expression. Does that make sense? So that was a big decision. I don't think that's a good thing. I think confidence, and being out, and being accepted is where it should be started. I don't know, sometimes I think that it comes from policy and law and rights. There need to be laws in place so that if someone makes a comment and they step out of line, they'll be really fucked over for making those comments. There needs to be more justice around those things because people are crafty and insecure and rude and selfish and there's all this social stuff that's unique to the person that could stand in the way, and I would say just more protection in high school, more ways to learn. Those are the two big ones I'm thinking of now.

Do you have anything else you want to add?

I guess talking about this reminds me of a lot of disappointment and struggle, but I really hope that this changes. It's very disturbing to me that it's safer to not be out, to make a living and to get money and to have followers, because I think I would do that. Someone like me who's comfortable in himself but still very insecure about society's effect, I would quiet out the sexuality to make sure that I'm okay in the world and appreciated and all this other stuff which is what the heteronormative world sees. I don't like that, but there need to be changes, and I don't know how that will happen. I get very disturbed about how the world is not very forgiving, not very open. We have elections this year, and some of the early candidates, most of them wanted to repeal all the gay marriage shit that's been many many years in the making. What does that mean, if you get to this age,

## Interview 2: Nate

and you're trying to figure out who you are, and you discover that things are going backwards? I don't like that. Part of me wants to say, I don't want to have to deal with it either. I don't want to have to come out and get my hands dirty and have to take people's darts to try to make a point and finally hope it works, or sell myself out emotionally and tell everyone my story and how I struggle and how I then won with my sexuality, and to lead other people. Right now personally evaluating my very deep emotional sexuality-based situation, I don't want that but I need attention from someone more than being able to reach out and make my own changes with people I know. That's just the state that I'm at now. Right now I'm really working at being comfortable with myself. I don't feel as oppressed as I ever was, but I do feel like people do have reservations. I'm very insecure about sexuality, and I'm also a big believer that you have to admit when you're insecure about something. I definitely am. I don't like going to parties and trying to meet gay people because if I get rejected I take it too personally, and it's about acceptance then and being gay, not about a person and a person, to me, so I stay away from that, because I want to meet the person who can offer me the social tools I need, the ones I haven't really gotten. I'm really happy that this school has the lambda alliance. I just do have reservations about its value to me. I wouldn't slam it down for its value to other people. It's somewhat popular. I don't like how it's seen outside of the club. Another school that I was thinking of going to is Emory university, and they have several frats that are big, iconic frats for gay people, and they throw parties and they're known...

Interview 3: Lisa

When did you graduate from high school and how old are you?

2008; 21

How do you identify in terms of sexual orientation and gender identity?

What are the options?

Whatever you feel.

I guess I would say gay. I guess.

You can qualify it as much as you want.

That one works.

When did you first realize you were gay?

It was kind of a chaotic process. First, like a lot of kids in high school, I thought I was bisexual for a couple years, but then I was like this is stupid, no, but then I realized I probably wasn't bisexual. More than once, actually.

Did you go back and forth?

Yeah.

When did you start identifying as bi? You said high school?

I think it was tenth grade. I'm pretty sure I was fourteen.

And then when did you change your mind?

The first time? Probably like tenth or eleventh grade. And then I went back again after I graduated. When I was like 18 or 19. And then I was like, "no," recently.

So you were bi when you were 18 or 19, and now you're gay again? Yeah, it's always chaotic. Good word to describe it. When did you first come out to others?

Probably like tenth grade.

Was it shortly after you realized it yourself or did it take awhile?

Probably. It didn't take that long, because my friends were the type who were like, "that's cool."

So you came out to your friends first?

Interview 3: Lisa

Yes, not my family ever, including now.

Did you come out to a select few or were you really open?

Mostly I told a couple friends, but after that anyone who asked I would tell them.

Switching gears, were you formally identified as gifted?

Yeah.

What sorts of services or programs did you have?

In kindergarten... they took me out of it in middle school, I don't know why. Probably because I was getting "C's" and they were like, "We don't like you anymore, you're not getting straight A's." It was sad. But I think it started in kindergarten, when some of us left the room and learned about the brain.

So a pull-out thing? It's always interesting what they do when they pull kids out because sometimes it's all over the place.

It really was. And the oldest I remember being in the gifted thing, being pulled out of the classroom, I think was sixth grade, and it was stupid. It wasn't even gifted stuff. It was stuff they weren't doing in the classroom. It doesn't make any sense. It's like, you're special, so you get to do the same not very interesting things in a different classroom. It was dumb. Welcome to Virginia public schools.

In middle school you said you were in regular classes?

I took a special test of something, I'm not sure what, but me and this other kid took this test, and it was patterns and stuff, so some kind of IQ test, and the teacher really liked me because I only missed one question. I don't know what that was for because we never did anything with that. That was eighth grade.

As far as classes it was general ed?

Yes. In high school I was in the easy classes too. By that time they super gave up on me.

That's so sad.

I know.

No honors or AP or anything?

No. I took IB music and IB math, but that was of my own volition. That wasn't like, "You are so special."

Interview 3: Lisa

Well it usually isn't in high school. Usually they let people choose, which is...good and bad. Did you feel different from your peers for being bi and then gay?

Not any different than I already was, because all my friends were the outcasts and stuff.

Can you tell me more about that?

A lot of my friends were either the gay kids, the drug kids, and the hippies. It was a good mix.

So you didn't feel different from them at all really?

Not for that. I don't remember being like, "Oh, I'm so different."

You said "not for that." Did you for other reasons?

I read your gifted questions, and that probably had to do with the fact that I wasn't good with being socially cool and stuff. I was kind of a square.

Do you think that has to do with your giftedness?

I hope that it's not just me. Maybe.

What do you mean by being a square?

I don't know. You know how kids are trying to be cool and stuff, going to parties? I was like, "This is stupid," and I would just say it, tactlessly. I could be tactful, I just don't want to.

Did you feel like you were smarter than the group you hung out with, or not really?

Probably. My school was a bunch of crap. My school was really bad, so it made sense.

As far as bi and gay, did you feel different from the school at large or were you pretty happily ensconced in your little group?

I did feel different from the school at large, but I wasn't depressed about it or anything. They were like football kids and stuff. Who wants to be like them?

Do you feel like your giftedness and your gayness interacted in any ways?

Interesting question. I don't think so. I don't think I thought about giftedness in high school, because I was in the easy classes, and I had a 1.3 GPA and I was failing all my classes because I didn't pay attention.

What kinds of things did you do socially to try and fit in?

## Interview 3: Lisa

I had one friend who would come over all the time and I would go to her house all the time. She annoyed me a little bit but we're still friends, so it worked out. Besides her, I remember not really doing stuff outside of school that much.

Because...?

Because my friends were always like, "Oh, I'm so busy, oh, I have a job, I have to do homework."

Okay, so just no time?

That's what they said, but I don't know. You never know.

So how did you feel about that?

I was like, "Damn. What are you doing?" I figured they probably didn't want to hang out with me, because who's that busy in high school? All my friends have a job, apparently?

So your one friend that was really close, did you feel like she was a support system?

Yeah. I was really mean to her sometimes. In ninth grade, I threw newspaper at her, and one time I almost sort of threw a chair at her, but not out of anger, just to see if she would run away. And that was me in ninth grade. I threw her CD in the garbage. I was really mean to her but she was friends with me anyway. She's like a social work major so now it all makes sense why she wanted to be friends with me.

You said you're still not out to your family... Did you come out to any teachers or anything?

I didn't see the need. My family, if I told them, they wouldn't be surprised. My mom and dad have asked me a lot of times and I've just avoided the question. It was really awkward. But they wouldn't be surprised, probably.

And why don't you want them to know?

I don't want to have that conversation. I know they would be nice, but I'm just avoiding the conversation.

Did you feel like your teachers were supportive in general?

Probably not... you're making me remember many stories from high school. I remember one time I had this friend who was the gay kid in school, there's always one. She's the one. She would always hang out with her girlfriend all out and open and kids would talk about them in class and the teachers wouldn't make them stop, and it's like, you are a

Interview 3: Lisa

teacher, you should make them stop. But obviously they heard them and everything. So that wasn't very nice of them.

Did that affect you, since you knew you were gay too?

It made me mad, but that's it.

That they were saying stuff, or that the teachers weren't doing anything?

Both. Probably more the teachers.

But you didn't feel...

Harassed? No.

So you weren't out even to yourself in middle school, right?

I don't think I thought about it in middle school.

Socially were you okay in middle school?

I did have some friends, but I had more bullies than friends. I did have some bullies in middle school.

What did they bully you for?

For being the kid who had no friends.

So high school was better though, because you had your little clique?

Yes, high school was better.

And what about college?

I went to three different colleges. The first one was art school. The second one was community college. And the third one was this one. Art school was good. What am I answering?

How it was socially, how people related to you as far as giftedness and gayness?

Art school I remember I was there for almost a year, and I dropped out. I remember hating the stupid hipster kids, because that was in Chicago, and hipsters are everywhere in Chicago. So I wasn't cool enough for them, with their drinking and parties and rolled cigarettes and fixed gear bicycles.

You said it was it good, though?

## Interview 3: Lisa

I hated them, but they weren't mean to me. And then I went to community college for two years and two summers, which was dumb, but I was there after I failed out of art school. I was trying to get a philosophy degree, and then all of this stuff, I put it back in the closet, because I was like, "this is getting in the way of my philosophy degree." That was for two years. It was really strange. I lived at home and everything so my whole life was on hold for community college. And then I came here, and I was here for a semester, last semester.

So, in community college, you didn't really deal with your sexual orientation?

I didn't really think about it at all, because as far as I was concerned that whole question would just get in the way of everything, and my goal in philosophy. It was irrelevant and impertinent as well.

It didn't bother you to ignore it, you just put it aside and you were fine with it?

Yeah.

What about here?

When I came back here it all hit me like a sack of bricks again. Last semester I remember clearly my roommates were in the kitchen talking about their boyfriends, this dude who they kept bringing over. Every morning I would wake up and see him. He's not there anymore... I wonder what happened to him. So then that was when I realized that I would never have these conversations. I thought that I could get away with it and stuff, but then I was like, "no." It was Thursday night so I went to Lambda after that, and I was like, "yes." That was last semester. I was trying to convert to Orthodox Judaism, which you can't do here, you have to move to New York. So I was doing that. I don't know if you know this, but they really love marriage. They idolize freaking marriage. So I was like, "I could do that," and then I was like, "I would have to do that if I wanted to convert to Orthodoxy. And then I realized that that wasn't going to work out either. That was like last week, so we're up to the present.

Why did you realize it wasn't going to work out?

Because I realized that they are freaking straight privileged, for serious, for real. These people are like old men, Orthodox rabbis, making all the decisions for everyone, and that's not going to work out for me. I thought it would at first, but then I realized that it was just so stupid to let them do that.

Straight privilege is great...



## Interview 3: Lisa

It's so stupid. I just realized what it was this semester, during winter break, and now my whole world has changed now that I know what's going on.

Going back to high school, as far as coping strategies, selecting your group of friends, right? Did you downplay your sexuality in that group of friends, or up-play it, or ignore it?

I think I up-played it. I also tried to start a GSA or whatever at my school, but then I was also a senior, and the day I tried to propose it, freaking Virginia Tech took the attention away from everyone. So I couldn't do it because everyone's attention was diverted.

Why did you try to start one?

I think I just wanted to get everyone together. It wasn't for political reasons or anything. I think I just wanted everyone in one place, all my friends in one place, to have them all together.

So mostly social?

Yeah, probably.

Did you do anything political or have any political inclinations, or not really?

No, I wasn't into anything political in high school.

So you upplayed your sexuality to try to fit in?

Probably. You know what happens to kids when they just come out and junk? They kind of go all out and stuff, and I think that's what happened to me. I didn't realize it at first, of course, but I think that's what I was doing.

What other things did you do to cope? Were you in any extracurriculars?

No.

What about online? Did you do anything?

There was this website. It was really dumb. It was like a forum for kids, but it was really stupid because their advice really sucked because they were also in high school.

An LGBT forum?

Yeah.

Did you spend a lot of time there?

Interview 3: Lisa

I spent way too much time there. I don't remember what I talked about. It took weirdly a lot of my time.

What about researching gayness, queer things?

I researched a lot of trans stuff. I'm very well versed now.

Why?

I feel like I thought I was in tenth grade for awhile.

How was that as far as feelings, and socially?

For me, it was more interesting than anything. I was fascinated with what was happening the whole time. I was like, "this is fun."

Your friends were okay with it?

Yeah.

Did they know?

Yeah. I don't remember. My one friend, I spent so much time with her that she was my only friend, pretty much, and everyone else was like acquaintances. I wasn't really good friends with anyone else. But she would accept anything I did, frankly.

You said you didn't pay attention in class. Was that intentional?

That was me hating school, because powerpoints, because it was so boring, and those kids copy the powerpoints word for word and I have to sit there and wait for them, and it was so dumb. When you're done with your test, you have to wait, and when you're done with a powerpoint slide, you have to wait, and you have to wait some more, and it was so annoying.

You don't think it has anything to do with gayness?

I don't think so? Everyone thinks that they're getting straight "As" because they're good at copying, so now they think I suck at school because I get a 1.3, even though I was the one who was so bored by their crap.

What about teachers? Did you have close relationships with them?

I liked some of them. Most of them were kind of crazy themselves. A lot of them got pregnant and left. It was a really high turnover rate at my school.

So not very close relationships?

Interview 3: Lisa

I wouldn't say close. I don't know what close is. What is close?

Talk to them about your life...?

No. They're old.

Do you feel like they accepted you?

I think they were neutral. They were just like, "Oh, another kid." The kids in my high school, there were a lot of goth kids, so they were probably used to it.

Do you think you did anything negative to try to fit in and be okay?

I tried to get drugs from my drug friends, but it didn't work at all. I think I had to buy them. I just wanted them for free. And I wasn't cool enough to get them for free. I was like, "Dude, do you have anything?" and they were like, "No!" So I wasn't really good at that.

Why did you try to get them?

Probably because that's just what kids do. Probably because I was so bored in class all the time.

You said in high school you were in IB music and math. Do you feel like socially those classes were different than the other classes?

No.

IB doesn't mean smarter, IB means you have rich parents who make you go to IB. That's what I always thought.

So the same across the board?

And regular classes too?

Yeah.

What advice would you give to teachers? What would you want teachers to do, and what institutional supports would you want there to be in schools?

Don't use powerpoints. Stop kids when they're being mean and saying stuff. They should recognize why certain students aren't doing their work. I probably would have done better in the advanced classes, I think. They should know that not doing your work doesn't mean that you should be in a lower class. That doesn't always solve the problem.

Interview 3: Lisa

And why the heck do you take kids out of the gifted program because they're getting "Cs?" That doesn't make any sense.

Anything else as far as gay stuff, or feeling supported and welcomed?

I wasn't expecting to be supported by the teachers. They're just there.

Would you have liked it if they had been supportive, or would that have been weird?

I don't know what that would have looked like.

What about institutionally as far as schools, classes, programs?

Like a lot of things, I think it wouldn't serve the purpose it was meant to do. It's like, "Let's give out brochures about racial diversity and have a talk about it," that doesn't solve the problem. That just makes you think you've solved the problem.

Interview 4: Nancy

When did you graduate from high school and how old are you?

2011; 19

How do you identify in terms of sexual orientation and gender identity?

Bisexual

When did you first realize you were bisexual?

I guess I sort of always knew, but it was more like around sixth grade or seventh grade where it started to become a thing, and I really noticed. I fought it for a really long time, especially in seventh grade, trying to push back those feelings, but then finally at one point I was just like, forget it, there's no point in fighting it. I might as well be who I am, at least to me, inside myself, and start trying to accept myself. But I wasn't out in middle school at all.

Why did you originally try to hide it and push it back?

I was just scared, I guess. I don't know. I knew that my parents would still love me, but... because I would have feelings for friends of mine, girl friends of mine, and it would be really weird. It was just scary.

When did you decide for yourself that you were okay with it?

About eighth or ninth grade, I was finally like, alright, this is what I am, can't really do anything about it, can't change it. There's no point in changing it.

Were you out in high school?

I wasn't out, but around junior year I started telling my best friends, and they all were really supportive and stuff, so that was better because then I had people to talk to about it. Toward the end of my senior year, I sort of had a small thing with this girl, and then some more people knew then, so I was kind of sort of like more people knew toward the end of my senior year. But I never was like, "I'm bi!" ever.

Did you come out to your parents?

Yes. That's kind of a funny story. My roommate is also bi, and that's kind of why we're roommates, because she saw it on the roommate thing, and she was like, "she won't judge me." She posted this video of Bill O'Reilly being all ignorant, kind of being an asshole, so we were watching it, and my mom was like "He's so ignorant," just raging, and then she just looked at me and goes, "Are you gay?" and I started laughing. I was like, "Well, sort of." I had already tried to tell her in ninth grade, but she was like, "Oh,

## Interview 4: Nancy

it's just a phase, don't worry about it, it's okay," and I was like, "Yeah, mom, it's not a phase." She wasn't upset, she was just kind of scared. I'm an only child, so she was kind of scared of what would happen to me. Just normal parent feelings. But then she was like, "Are you going to join any gay stuff at school?" so I said, "Yeah, I'll probably do Lambda, but it's not like they have a Dykes R Us there that I'm going to join..." And then she told my dad and that was fine. My parents are completely fine with it.

Would you say you're "out" out now?

Yeah, here, at school. And then with all my friends that I still see, back home, almost all of them know. So it's pretty much just being out.

Were you identified as gifted in school?

Yeah, not until seventh grade, though. This was really frustrating, because I got tested in elementary school like three times, but I'm really bad at math, so in elementary school you have to be good at everything, and since I'd always not do well at the math part, they'd be like, "You're not gifted." But finally in middle school, guidance somehow messed up my classes so I ended up in learning disabled classes for like half of seventh grade, and my English teacher finally was like, "What are you doing here? You're way too smart for this." So then she got me tested, and by then in middle school they had the classes broken up, so then I got put in all gifted classes, except for math. By the time I was in seventh grade I was gifted and I was labeled as gifted in eighth grade and all through high school.

In high school did you have honors, AP, or IB?

I took all honors except freshman year I took not honors math, which was a terrible terrible decision. I took AP classes. They also have this program for gifted students called GIS, which is gifted independent study, so what you do is you pick a mentor and for the last period of the day... we had a block schedule, so on the last block of day two you'd leave school and go hang out with your mentor and learn about their job and stuff. Then you created a project based off of that. This [gifted program] was really unique, apparently.

Did you feel like you were different from your peers for being bi?

Yeah, a little bit. I knew I was sort of different, but I also felt different from a lot of people because of being smart. I know that sounds cliché and kind of stupid. It was nice because basically all my friends were also gifted or they took honors/AP classes. So I didn't feel so different from them. I had a boyfriend through most of high school, so no one really knew. I think people sometimes suspected, but they never really said anything

## Interview 4: Nancy

to me. But if I asked my friends, they'd be like, "yeah, it's not really a surprise or anything."

You mostly hung out with other gifted peers? In middle school too?

Middle school was kind of weird. I don't like to remember sixth grade. I don't think anyone likes to remember sixth grade. But seventh grade, since I was in LD classes, I made some friends in there, so I feel like that was good for me socially, because it's like, I can interact with different groups of people. But when I switched classes, I started hanging out... I had a circle of friends who were all gifted and we all had the same classes together in middle school, so basically I hung out with them until about tenth grade when there was big drama and the group split up.

You didn't feel like those friends particularly cared that you were bi once they found out?

No. All of my best friends... A lot of my friends were cross country runners too, because I ran cross country and swimming, but I remember I told about five people my junior year, my really closest friends, and none of them cared at all. And then towards the end of my senior year when more people started finding out they didn't care at all, which is nice. It's also nice because the area I come from is kind of conservative, too, so I was kind of scared or worried about it, but really nobody cared that much. I think I was also kind of afraid because there's this sort of stigma, especially at my high school, that people who say they're bisexual are just kind of looking for attention or slutty, whatever, and it's like, "I'm not like that!" but I don't want to have that stigma attached to that. And it really annoyed me, because it's like, it's a real thing! I had a former friend of mine who said she was bisexual in tenth grade, and I was like, "No, no you're not, because I am and I know you're not."

Do you think that your group of friends was more accepting than the rest of the school at large would have been?

Yeah, I think so. I mean, especially because they also knew me, too. I mean, I don't know. I do have another friend who's gay, and he got bullied a lot. The gay people I know, they got bullied some, but it's not like really terrible levels of bullying, but still, it's not pleasant, obviously. For my one friend who's gay, it was a lot of the more popular girls, the girls who were friends with the guys who bullied him, or would have bullied him, were really good friends with him, so then as we got older it wasn't so bad, I think. I don't really know his experience, but I know in middle school it was hard.

For him or for you?

For him. For me it wasn't too bad. I never really got bullied, which was nice.

## Interview 4: Nancy

What do you think made your experience and his experience different?

I'm a girl, and it wasn't ever as noticeable. With my friend, it was really like... you knew. And I felt bad, because everyone knew before he even knew, and... He was the first person I told, actually, because I was like, "I know he won't care!" And also, like I said, I had a boyfriend through most of high school, so it's like, she has a boyfriend. That I guess didn't really occur to a lot of people.

Do you think that you did anything intentionally to make it less noticeable, or it was just sort of how it was?

It was just how it was.

You don't really feel like being bi affected your social life at all?

Not really. Sometimes it was hard because I would develop crushes on my best friends, and that would be hard sometimes being around them, but after awhile it would dissipate and just be back to normal.

Would you say that the only impact being gifted had was just being friends with gifted people?

Do you feel like you used any particular coping strategies to fit in or to be more comfortable, other than having a boyfriend and not being out? Did you intentionally choose not to come out?

Yeah. I never chose to publicly be out. I sort of kind of regret that, because it would have been a cool thing to stand up and be like, "yeah," but it's not like a huge deal.

What about other extracurriculars?

I do a lot of sports, so sports were always fun and a good way of just de-stressing in general. I ran cross country and track and then I swam.

Did you feel like you had any close relationships with teachers?

Yeah. Oh, I was also on the creative writing magazine, so writing was also something. I actually sort of came out to my creative writing class through a story, like a little essay I wrote, so I sort of came out to them through that, and that was cool because they were also all really accepting. They were artsy people. But yeah, my favorite teacher was my history teacher and I had her for world history I my freshman year, AP US history, and then I decided to have her be my mentor for my final semester of GIS, and she was the only adult other than my parents who I came out to. I even came out to her before I came out to my parents because I was like, I had met this girl and it didn't go well at all and I



## Interview 4: Nancy

was really upset, so my teacher knew I was really upset, and I ended up, one day while the class was doing something else, I just told her everything, and she was really accepting. It was kind of nice to have an adult perspective on it, too.

Did your high school have a GSA? A gay straight alliance?

No, we didn't have that. A little too conservative to have that.

Did you go online at all to either find queer friends through social networking or look up queer things?

No, not really. Once I got into William and Mary and looked into clubs, I looked at GSAs or whatever you said. I started looking through for stuff like that, but I never really looked up anything like that.

What about now, in college? How has your social scene changed, related to being bi?

I come to Lambda, and I have friends there, but I don't hang out with them so much. Mostly I hang out with my rugby friends, and a lot of people on the rugby team are gay or bi. Not everyone, though. I don't want to perpetuate that stereotype. I really do not want to perpetuate that stereotype. But because everyone's kind of accepting, and here in general everyone's accepting. Everybody in my hall that I'm good friends with now, and I think everyone in my hall just kind of knows. Nobody's weirded out by that or anything.

Do you feel your gifted identity affected your identity as bi, or vice versa?

I don't know. That's an interesting question, though.

What would you recommend to teachers to make schools better and more welcoming?

I think teachers need to let people know that they're open and accepting and that they can come talk to teachers. When I came out to my teacher, it was just nice to have an adult that I knew wasn't my parents. I mean, I love my parents, don't get me wrong, but an adult that you know beforehand isn't going to judge you. Someone to talk to who has a different perspective. Because your parents love you, but they also have different concerns from your teacher.

What about institutionally, school settings in general? Is there anything that you think would make them better?

If they had stuff like specific counselors, maybe? Or someone trained for LGBT kids. I know you can't have that in every school, and it depends because the situation varies, but

Interview 4: Nancy

I don't know, I think that would probably be a good thing to institute, for people who are having a hard time.

## Interview 5: Jackie

When did you graduate from high school and how old are you?

2011; 19

How do you identify in terms of sexual orientation and gender identity?

I identify as queer. I will go by lesbian, but it doesn't really fit right for me.

When did you come out to yourself or first realize that you were queer?

Probably April of my junior year of high school. I started thinking, "What if I also like girls." So when I first sort of started realizing it in myself I thought I was bisexual, and I don't mean to say that bisexuality isn't a thing, I'm always afraid that's going to happen, but for me that's how it started. I mean, I found men attractive, I had boyfriends, it didn't gross me out to kiss them or anything, but then I was like, oh, maybe this too. But then the more that I sort of thought about it I realized now that I like girls.

When did you first come out to other people?

I came out to my best friend probably like a week or so after I started realizing this about myself, because I was like, "Hmm, I think I might be bisexual," and she's one of those people who knows me better than I know myself, so it was nice to talk to her about it. I never really had to hide it from my friends, then I started coming out to my other friends because I was one of those people who all my friends were gay, so when I was like, "Oh, by the way, I think I might be this," they were like, "...yeah..." So then coming out to adults and family came way later.

When?

I came out to my mother over the phone because I don't live with her probably the first semester of my senior year of high school. I was just having a phone conversation with her and she just guessed and got it out of me. I actually didn't come out to my father until the night before the Over the Rainbow info session when I got here. They were both completely fine with it.

When you came out to your friends were you "out" out, was it open, or was it just a select group of people that knew?

I definitely didn't hide it from anybody, but I didn't go around "Hello everybody, I'm gay!" I just was like, "Yeah, I think I'm this way." You know, I'm from the Bible belt section of the Midwest, so there's a very bad stigma towards it, and a lot of people at my school think that lesbianism is for attention, and a lot of times, and I hate to say this, it kind of is at my school. People imitate each other. And so I didn't want teachers and

## Interview 5: Jackie

other students to react badly toward me because I was already sort of disliked at my school because I was the smart kid, and people already kind of hated me. Not that I cared, it just made day to day life difficult when I felt very isolated. And then that's not even the gender expression issues. So I cut my hair at the end of my junior year, not because of my sexuality. A lot of people assumed that, it's just... it's thick. But my friend Daniel was like, "everyone knows you're gay now." "Why, I only told a couple people." "Well, you did cut your hair." I was like, "that doesn't have anything to do with anything." And I didn't hide it from people at school, but I definitely didn't project it. When I took my girlfriend to senior prom, we slow danced, but I had an anxiety attack the entire time. It was like, "Don't look at anybody, oh my god." So that was a thing. So I didn't hide it, but I didn't announce it all the time. I'm sort of that way now. If people ask me I'll say "yeah," but I'm not going to be like, "hello, my name is [name] and I'm gay." I don't do that. But it wasn't just nobody else could know but my friends—it wasn't like that.

Were you identified as gifted in school?

Yes. When I was in elementary school I was in my school's gifted program. I don't know if they have that in Virginia, but it was like, "you're really smart, go to this class once a week for other smart kids." So yes, I was kind of like... I don't want to call myself a prodigy, but when I was little I was extremely intelligent. I'm not saying I got stupider as I got older, but you know, public school kind of slows you down a little bit. I almost got advanced a grade when I was in fifth grade, and that's happened a couple times where they've been like, "We're going to move you up," and then just because of the timing I didn't do it. So I guess I would say I was gifted. I was in scholar bowl and other academic teams in high school, I was valedictorian of my high school class, so yes, I would say I was gifted.

In middle school did you have special honors classes or anything?

They cancelled the gifted program when I was in middle school, something happened with the teacher, but there was like scholastic bowl and the way that they did the math classes, when you were in sixth grade you would take a test and see if you would go on to seventh grade level math as a seventh grader or if you would go on to pre-algebra, and there was only maybe one or two pre-algebra classes, so the track that I went on I did pre-algebra and then algebra, seventh and eighth grade, so that when I was in high school I graduated taking calculus. So I was one of the kids that was ahead.

In high school did you have AP, IB?

There was only one AP class offered in my high school, and I was in that, it was AP English, but there was also a lot of dual enrollment, dual credit classes with the local

## Interview 5: Jackie

community college, and to be able to get into those and actually get college credit for them you had to take a test, and you had to get certain scores on those to be able to be considered to be in them. I was in a lot of those. So yes.

Did you go to the community college or were there professors there?

They trained the high school teachers to do it.

So you stayed at the school?

Yes.

Did you feel different for being queer?

Did I feel different after I came out to myself, or did I feel different from other people?

Either, before and after.

It definitely opened my mind up a lot. Even just the way I started thinking started changing because, I don't mean to sound stereotypical, but I am from a Midwest, bible belt, conservative religious community, and when I was raised I was told that was gay, he's gay, that means' he's bad, and I never thought of it and I was like, "I'm straight," and then in high school I went through this awkward conservative republican phase, not to bash conservative republicans, but I did go through a phase where I was like, "I'm okay with my gay friends, I don't think it's a choice because I'm scientific minded, but also I don't think they should be married," and I'm not sure why I thought that.

When was that?

That was really my sophomore year of high school, while I was still in my no, don't get married, don't get married phase. Then, I don't know, literally it's like I felt something switch in my brain one day and I started thinking differently, and it was like, wait a minute. I started seeing women differently. I was like, what? I don't know if it was my own personal sexuality kicking in, I don't know if I didn't have it before? Because I went through puberty early, so I don't know if that's correlated or not. And it made it so I started noticing how hard it is to talk about things with people, even now. I have a girlfriend, and sometimes I'm just like, "Oh, I went to go visit my friend," as an automatic response, because it's so much harder when you're choosing your language. I'm always worried, is it okay to say this around certain people? Is that okay? Should I censor myself? Is this bad? It's not that I view who I am as bad, it's just, am I being selfish if I accidentally offend a person? And I started noticing how heteronormative everything in the entire world is, how heteronormative classes are.

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## High school classes?

Yeah, I can remember being in my AP English class and we were talking about poetry, and analyzing a poem, and the teacher made some analogy like, "Read this like you're sending this love note to your boyfriend or girlfriend. Guys, would you say this to your girlfriend?" and I just remember thinking, I don't fit in that, at all. So just the language that we use, I sort of noticed that it's incredibly heteronormative, and in literature, teachers never like to bring stuff up, like if there's homoerotic subtext, especially in Shakespeare. The teachers never really recognize that or even talk about it, at least in my school, but nobody brought it up.

## Did you feel stigmatized for that? How did that make you feel?

I was just kind of going through an angry phase. It made me roll my eyes at it, and I just wanted to always speak up, but I felt silent because I knew that I was maybe the only out person. I don't want to say I was the only gay person in my class, because obviously I don't know other people, but I felt like I couldn't just speak up and say something because it was me against twenty other people, and hearing people say things, I always was afraid to stick up for myself because it was just me. That was it.

## You said you were mostly friends with other gay kids, though? So in individual classes you felt like you were the only one?

Yeah, because most of my friends were either younger than me or older than me. So in my grade level I don't think there was another. Now people are starting to come out to me, just like "Hey [name], I feel like I can talk to you about this," because I was the only sort of out person in my class, but other than that, I don't think there was a gay person who was out in my graduating class besides me.

## How big was your school?

About 500 kids, so my graduating class was just over 100. It was small.

## What kind of things did you do to cope with the awkwardness and the feeling different and feeling alone?

Definitely having my other queer friends helped, because I could just sort of rant to them and they would understand, because a lot of them were out a lot longer than I had been, or had been feeling these things longer than I had been, because this was only something I had been experiencing for a couple months. It never crossed my mind before. Also, I don't really blog, but I do have a tumblr, and there's a very positive queer and feminist community on tumblr, so I could rant about something or see another person commenting on an issue of somebody else's and that may have been my same issue, like discussing

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people not being able to take their girlfriends to the prom, seeing other people having my problems, that it's not just me. It made me feel better, and it felt like a place I could speak up and share how I felt and what I thought without being further isolated from my class. Because people didn't not like me because I was gay, they just didn't like me. So that just made me even more afraid to speak up.

Earlier you mentioned they didn't like you because you were smart. Can you talk about that?

Well I definitely wasn't the only smart kid. My friend Sarah was also valedictorian, and the quarterback of the football team was valedictorian, but I guess I was a little more opinionated, and I never really fit in. I was kind of the new kid in third grade, and I don't know, I was a little pompous when I was younger, but they were fine with Sarah and Landon being smart because they admired them, but me being smart was a bad thing. People would always be frustrated or make fun of me because of my intelligence, so I was always sort of ashamed of it a little bit.

Did you find that even in your dual enrollment classes?

Yes, I did. In my senior calculus class, that was dual enrollment, there was a sophomore in there, the only sophomore. He's trying to get into MIT. He was incredibly intelligent; people loved him. But people didn't like me. I never understood that. It always made me feel sort of like I was being smart wrong, or that I was mediocre or something. It always made me sort of doubt myself.

I assume your queer friends made you feel less alienated for being queer, is that true? How were they as far as being smart?

Um, this is going to sound terrible. They thought they were smarter than they actually were. That's pretty much it.

So they didn't make fun of you for it?

No, no. You teased the way you do with friends, but it was never angry or they didn't hate me.

For tumblr, when did you start having online communities?

I started having a tumblr I think right before my junior year of high school, and I really didn't get into the community aspect of it until I started getting into feminism, and I found a lot of feminist blogs to follow.

Was that before or after you came out?

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That was before.

You talked about your teachers not talking about it. Were there any teachers you felt were supportive?

Definitely. He was a substitute teacher, and he was also my karate sensei. He was one of the first people I actually came out to. He's like a second father to me, so of course he was okay with it. I told him, and he was like, "yeah, and?" and I was like, "okay, thank you." There were a couple of lesbian teachers at the high school who were the volleyball coaches and PE teachers, and one taught driver's ed., and everyone loved them.

Did you come out to them?

Not directly, so no. I wasn't ever really close to them because I was in band so I didn't have to take PE, because they considered marching band enough activity, even though we only did it like three times a year. I didn't really know them very much, so no, I never came out to them. And I don't think there were any gay male teachers at all.

In general most teachers didn't make an effort to be supportive or anything?

The only time I saw that happen was my senior AP English teacher was sharing a little personal family anecdote in class about how her son would call things either gay or his dad called him gay joking around, and he went, "I'm not gay" or something, and her fourth grader daughter went, "do you even know what that means?" and he went "It means stupid, right?" and her daughter went, "no, it means ..." and the teacher went "YES, that's what it means" to her son. She was saying that she stopped her daughter from telling her younger son that it means what it actually means. And the whole class was laughing at this and I'm just sitting here going "oh my gosh..." I was sitting there visibly angry, and she was saying, "obviously, that's not what it means, but I don't want my son knowing that," and I'm just sitting there the whole class, pissed. When class got out, I had lunch right after that class, so I wasn't in a hurry to get anywhere. She kind of pulls me aside, she's like, "I'm so sorry if I offended you." And I'm just like, "It's okay.." because I didn't want to be like, "YEAH you offended me," because I was afraid of sticking up for myself, and she was like, "despite how I feel, I don't think it's an appropriate subject for my younger son, and you understand. I didn't mean to offend you or anything." I'm just like, "No, it's okay." At least she apologized... she tried, she made an effort. But that was the only time I heard a teacher talk about it, at all. Gay was just a thing that didn't happen where I'm from.

Except for all your friends?

Some of them, yeah.



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But there were other people in the school, just not enough?

Not very many. The mostly out people were girls, and it was because a couple of people who were older than me, they graduated, they were kind of popular, they were in the softball popular way, like, oh, this girl's awesome and she's good on the softball team, and she's out, and then there's this girl, and she's out, and all the young lesbians tried to look like this one girl. They were okay because they were sporty and popular and cool and people liked them. But a lot of people just thought they were doing it for attention because they all tried to look exactly the same. I don't know, they might be doing it for attention, but they might not be. If it's not hurting anybody who really cares. The gay men, you did not come out as a gay man. People would rip you to shreds, except in certain circles. My friend Daniel was out as gay and people would call him faggot all the time, even if you weren't gay. If you were slightly effeminate, people would say, "oh god, you faggot," stuff like that. So Daniel was out, my friend Curtis is out to his friends, but he tries not to spread it out very much because he got in a lot of trouble with his parents. It was mostly girls who were out and none of them were my friends. There were a couple gay men who were kind of out, but they still got a lot of flack for it.

Did you have any extracurriculars, through the school or in general?

I did karate. I was in band, and I also took outside piano and cello lessons. I did dance for six years. I was on the teen advisory board at the library. I was vice president of foreign language club, I did scholastic bowl, I did this thing called wize, which is kind of like scholastic bowl except you take tests. I did so much stuff in high school, I don't know how I had time to do anything.

You were talking about how some of the other gay people were into sports so they were okay, or some of the other smart people were into sports so it was okay, but you don't feel like your clubs gave you any immunities like that?

No, people just didn't like me in general.

Other than tumblr and the community aspect of it, did you use the internet to try to find out things?

Yes.

Do you feel like that helped?

Yes? Definitely one of the first ways I found out, started realizing it, was one of my favorite tumblrs was... I've always been into pin-ups, and it was pin-up art of superheroes, because I'm really into comic books, and female superheroes, and I was looking at these and I was like, oh, so I started "doing some research," like you do, and

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even now, it's like, "Is it okay for a lesbian to maybe like a guy every once in awhile? Is that bad, does that make you bisexual, does that still make you gay?" I would research all kinds of stuff. I looked up definitions, I tried watching movies that were popular in the communities or whatever, I tried to immerse myself to be more included because there was no community where I was from.

I tried to pull out some of the positive coping strategies. As far as negative coping strategies, do you feel like there was anything you did to try to be socially accepted that maybe weren't so positive? You talked about being angry...

Yeah, I was sort of mad at the world, but... that was just because I was a little more extreme in my beliefs, and I guess because I was one person against everybody else, and people didn't like me already. What harm could it do? I was also going through a very hard time in my life because I started experiencing depression as a junior, so that was a thing, and just a lot of stuff going on in my life, so just kind of angry and annoyed at everything. I would get really riled up about activism, even though I really wouldn't do anything, I was still opinionated, maybe on some things I shouldn't have been because I wasn't well-versed in them. So I kind of started off as an extreme, and I've sort of cooled down since then a little bit. Other than that, I don't think I did anything bad because of my sexuality to cope.

Can you expand at all upon being "extreme" in your beliefs and being an extreme person?

I mentioned that when I was a sophomore I was sort of extreme conservative, and then I came out and I went extreme liberal the other way. I still have a lot of the same beliefs, I was just more vocal about them then. I'm not saying that's bad, it's just not good for me, so I was just more vocal and more angry about things. I'm glad I didn't have that phase in college. Yeah, I was just getting into arguments a lot about stuff, because I was one of those... a lot of the things I had opinions on, like abortion or prostitution, I was the only person at my school who had those same feelings. In classes that gave me opportunities to discuss those, I was very vocal and I would make a lot of people upset.

Do you have any insights about your extreme conservative phase?

Well, I was raised in a Baptist home, even though neither of my parents were extremely religious, well my mom's getting there... I was raised Baptist, but I never knew about gay marriage or abortion or anything like that, and then I got into high school and I started being surrounded by, "if you feel this way, then this is what you should believe in," and I sort of accepted it and started going to church again, and my best friend was really conservative, and so I only heard one side of the story most of the time. I sort of

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tagged along with that, because it seemed right at the time. Then as I sort of expanded, opened my mind a little bit, and I'm not saying people who are conservative are closed minded, it's just for me it was closed mindedness, it was ignorance. It's pretty much just because of church and my best friend.

What about college? How has it changed or not changed?

If I would have went somewhere else this may have been different, but I wrote my acceptance essay to get in about my coming out story, because I wrote about how to discover things about yourself you have to be open to other things, so I wrote about even if you don't agree with something, be open to it, and come to find out that this might be who you are. So I found out who my roommates are when I messaged them on facebook, I made sure to tell them, "by the way, I'm gay, I hope that's okay. If you want to switch rooms, I understand completely," because I had problems with that as a senior of being on a school trip and someone not wanting to room with me, like "I don't want to room with that dyke," those words were said. So I made sure to email my roommates and be like, "hey, I am gay, I hope that's okay! I'm not going to ravish you in the night, I promise! I'm not a monster, I'm not a spinster." So they were both like, "Oh yeah, that's totally fine," and this is the first time in my life where I've had a lot of gay friends or straight friends who were cool with it. In my dorm, I think there's two out gay people, there's me and then there's [name] upstairs, and people are totally fine with it. People on my hall are cool with it. I get here and I broke up with my girlfriend when I got here and if I had a crush or go on a date all the girls will be super supportive of me, and I've never really experienced that before, having people be supportive and not double-take at it. We had extended orientation, and we did the diversity one... maybe it was regular orientation, and we sort of had to share our feelings afterward. I talked about my experiences during high school, and people are incredibly supportive and weren't offended by me at all, and it's really nice to not have to worry about whose hand I hold in public in case my parents find out. When I had my ex-girlfriend, if we'd go to Walmart together, I'd be afraid about showing any affection to her, because I was like, "what if a friend of my dad sees, and what if he tells my dad." Here it's like I can finally be open about it. So it's not that I wasn't out in high school, I just wasn't very open about it, and here I know I don't have to hide because both my parents are fine with it, and everybody I've met here is fine with it. Even now sometimes I'll catch myself substituting words, being afraid to say something, because what if they react badly. In my German class just this morning, I was like, "I went to see the German film. Marlene Dietrich is in it. She's beautiful, I love her." Then as soon as I said it, I was like, "am I allowed to say that? Is it bad that I said that about her? Is my teacher going to think I'm weird now?" That sort of thing. I'm always afraid, I'm still afraid that people are going to think, "Oh, you're not really gay," or "you're stereotypically gay," or "this is wrong," or "this is stupid, why are

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you telling me this?" I'm always afraid people will react badly to it, but they haven't here. That's just a sort of reaction that's still alive from when I was in high school. But the community, just the way I feel here, is incredibly positive. I think Lambda is amazing.

I'm assuming you didn't have a GSA at your high school? Gay straight alliance?

No, we did not at all. No.

Do you feel like your gifted identity has impacted your queer identity or vice versa?

Yes, because as soon as I found out about it, I did all the research I could. I didn't want to be misinformed. I didn't want to say something and offend somebody, or misuse a word. I didn't want to offend somebody or offend myself by my own ignorance. So I started reading everything, and watching things, and making sure I knew what these terms meant so that I could talk about it intelligently. It made me want to be well informed about it instead of just accepting what other people had said and sort of misspeaking without intending to. I wanted to be able to talk intelligently to people who had known about this longer than I had.

Do you feel like the fact that people here are generally smarter has had an influence on how accepting the community is toward LGBT people?

Yeah, because I think a lot of the time bigotry comes out of ignorance, not to say that all bigots are stupid, and I'm not saying that people where I'm from were stupid. I'm just saying that a lot of the people who go here are from areas where the schools are very well funded, and also aren't allowed to be bigoted because people will get fired, and that was not the case at my school. So it's a little bit of a combination, and also I think people who are... I don't want to say that people who are smarter are atheist, but a lot of people who are scientific here are more atheist, and they're more sort of okay with things, or if they're not they've been raised to be open about it and they can logically realize that this is not a bad thing. It sort of goes with being open minded, I suppose. Not to say that stupid people can't be accepting or that smart people can't be bigots.

What suggestions would you have for teachers or for institutional policies for schools in general?

Stop not letting people bring their boyfriend or girlfriend to dances. Actually talk about it in classes. Don't just assume heterosexuality. Use less heteronormative speech and class topics. Strict zero tolerance bullying, even verbal, because sometimes verbal bullying can be terrible because of the mental aspect. Offer gay straight alliances. Maybe offer something that would educate people who were interested. Maybe kids who don't come

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from a very supportive family but are curious or realize this about themselves, and they have nowhere else to go, maybe they could have resources for them to be able to educate themselves. I don't want to say that's not the internet, because not everything on the internet is false, but that's more reliable than the internet. Stopping heteronormativity, because that is a problem.

Anything you want to add?

Is this only for sexual orientation, or gender identity too? There were also no trans kids at my high school, and I used to get some flak for my gender presentation because sometimes I would dress kind of butchish because I have bad knees, and loose clothes are comfier, and it was just when I got here that I started dressing more "feminine." I would get a lot of flak when I would dress differently, "Gosh [name], I didn't know you were a girl!" So it was a rigid sort of gender thing too, unless you were in sports. That was a thing. I don't know if that has anything to do with anything, but I don't want to leave anything out. A lot of people didn't even know about trans anything. I'm purely self-educated on all things trans. Definitely educating kids about that kind of stuff is a good thing, so that there's no stigma around it and no mystery and no misspeaking and no ignorance, because people are afraid of what they don't understand.

Interview 6: Adam

When did you graduate from high school and how old are you?

2011; 18

How do you identify in terms of sexual orientation and gender identity?

Gay male

When did you first realize you were gay?

I think I started questioning the summer between 8<sup>th</sup> grade and 9<sup>th</sup> grade, and then I really started thinking about it early ninth grade, and I think I came out in December of 2007, 2008.

Who did you come out to first?

One of my friends. A friend from middle school who went to a different high school, and then I slowly came out to more and more people until everyone at school knew.

What about family?

When I first came out I came out as bi, so one of my friends, he called me one day and was like, a kid from our middle school had been telling us [name]'s bi, and he called me and was like, "he's been saying this, do you want me to tell him to stop or beat him up or something for spreading rumors about you?" and I was like, "well no, actually I am." He was like, "Oh, okay, that's cool." Then he went and made a facebook group about it. My fifth grade teacher found it and apparently some of the popular kids from middle school had joined that in high school, and they had been completely bashing me, like, "Oh, I always knew he was a faggot, oh, he's such a gay kid," and she found it and she sent a letter home with my younger brother, who went to the school where she taught, and my parents saw it and they confronted me about it, and it was very awkward and absolutely horrible, but then my dad was like, "Well the Bible says we have to love our children, so I'm okay with it, I guess..." So they were both okay with it, but it was just horribly awkward to come out that way. But then it kind of became something we didn't talk about. I actually ended up re-coming out to my mom at the end of my junior year, and she was completely fine with it. This time I came out as gay, she was like, "Oh, that's fine," and as soon as I told her she was like, "Do you know any cute boys? Are there any cute boys that you like?" And then my dad kind of figured it out when I had my first boyfriend in the beginning of senior year. He just confronted me, not confronted me, asked me in the car, "So, I know you're involved in gay straight alliance, but I guess you're gay? And he's your boyfriend?" and I was just like, "Yeah," but my dad was cool with it too.

Were you formally identified as gifted in school?

Interview 6: Adam

No. We didn't have a gifted program in private school.

What kind of private school was it?

Catholic school.

Did you have honors or advanced classes or anything like that?

No. It was just... well, actually, in math we had the lower math and upper math, I don't know what the equivalent of that was in public school, I think like pre-algebra and algebra, and I was in the upper math and then the upper literature class, I think.

Did you feel different from your peers for being gay?

In middle school it wasn't the sexuality issue that made me feel different, I was just always the smart kid who always answered, and people made fun of me for that. I was also very timid and shy and quiet, and I didn't have a lot of guy friends. I mostly hung out with girls. So already in middle school and later years in elementary school kids would say "Oh, he's so gay," or one girl called me a fag, and my parents got involved with that. In high school I think I did feel different, just because I saw all my friends having boyfriends, or my guy friends having girlfriends, and I was like, "Why don't I have that? Why can't I find another gay guy? Is there something wrong with me, are there just no other gay people in this area?" It was very difficult for me to understand why, how was it fair that they could find that and I couldn't at first.

How did your friends react after you came out to them?

Everyone was really supportive. "Oh, we still love you, and we're totally fine with it." A couple people I had known from middle school, they went on to go to private high school, but I went to public high school. I stayed in contact with them. One or two were like, "ummmmm, okay," and we kind of lost contact because they weren't comfortable with it, I guess. Most people were just like, "Oh, okay, yeah, we still accept you, we love you."

And what about the wider school? You said everyone kind of knew?

Kids I knew from middle school, half of them were kind of dickish about it, to be blunt. In high school most people were okay with it. A couple people were not so okay with it. Sometimes I'd hear people talking in the halls. I've always worn... as of sophomore year in high school I started wearing skinny jeans, and I like skinny jeans that are very colorful or different, so I hear people talking about me as I walked through the halls sometimes, like "That's really gay," or just overhearing rude comments. But, for the most part it was not that bad.

Interview 6: Adam

You said your high school had a GSA? When did you get involved with that?

I tried to get involved my freshman year, but I later found out that they had only met once in the entire year. My sophomore year I was kind of involved, but it was very very small. There were maybe four or five constant members, and then it kind of died out that year. My junior year my friend and I were like, we're going to restart this and make it better, and we managed to keep it going our junior and senior years. We were president and vice president, and we had at least five to ten people show up at every meeting.

Did you feel like that helped you find a support system and other people?

Yeah. It was mostly girls who joined, and when I originally joined it was just mostly lesbians. But it was still just nice to know that, hey, there are other LGBT people here and I'm not alone in being different in my sexuality.

So high school was public then... did you have any gifted, honors, or AP?

Honors and AP, yes.

And you took those?

Yes.

Did you feel like there was a difference in how people perceived you or treated you in advanced classes versus regular classes?

Definitely. I think in the advanced classes, how do I say this... Something I noticed at my high school was that most of the kids in advanced classes were White, and most of the kids in regular classes were Hispanic or Black, and I think most of the kids who were in advanced classes also were middle or upper class, kind of. So they were fairly, if not open or accepting, then tolerant, and it wasn't something that I would worry, in class, getting called a fag or something. But then in regular classes, which I only took one of... and I took a couple electives and in some of those it would be typically people who were raised in a different environment, so the cultural thing, and they would kind of be very offensive. That's not politically correct at all...

How would you say you coped with feeling different and feeling alone, other than GSA, obviously?

I think my coping strategies kind of changed as I got older and kind of matured a bit. In middle school I didn't really know how to deal with teasing and everything, so I think I kind of acted out toward my parents, or sometimes I'd tell them what was happening. I've always been very close to my mom, so I'd talk to her about it, but then I think there



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was a deeper effect, and I yelled at my parents a lot when I was in middle school, and all of that. Then in seventh and eighth grade, my mom and a friend of my mom's kind of pushed me, didn't push me but gave me that little, "hey you should go do this, try it..." into therapy, and that helped tremendously with dealing with bullying, dealing with things at home, and everything. And then in high school it was more like talking to friends and talking to my mom and playing piano. That's always been something that if I'm stressed out or freaking out about something I'll go play piano and I'll calm down and then I can go back and do whatever it was I was doing before.

In high school did the teasing for being smart get any better, or did that continue?

That stopped. I remember being in my first honors class in high school and people were talking and actually answering the teacher and lots of hands were going up, and it just shocked me because in middle school it was like smart kids, or if you were overly participative in class, you'd get ridiculed, like, "Oh, you're such a nerd," stuff like that. In high school it was like that was the norm. It wasn't weird to be smart, it was normal.

GSA, friends, piano... did you do any other extracurricular stuff?

I was in Latin club. And I was involved with GLSEN also in my junior and senior years. Junior year it was more just discovering this whole branch of adults and other GSAs that existed in Northern Virginia, and then senior year I applied to be in the GLSEN Jump Start team, which is like youth leaders and members of GSAs, and it was like a leadership team. We'd go to workshops and stuff and learning more things, help with our local GSAs, help people who are trying to form GSAs, and stuff like that.

Kind of activism-y type stuff? Did you feel like that helped give you a sense of belonging?

I think so. It was more like junior year when I first... GLSEN had dances every year, and I went to my first GLSEN dance and there were a bunch of gay people there, and a bunch of straight girls and a bunch of lesbians and straight guys it was like "Oh my gosh,, I had no idea there were this many people in the area," and I didn't know that there could be a gay dance and actually dance with people I wanted to dance with or whatever.

What about teachers? Were they supportive, not supportive, indifferent?

The majority were supportive, and if not supportive then... I mean, I'm sure there were some teachers, I know there were some teachers who had fairly conservative views, but they would never say anything to me rude or disparaging. There was never any instance where someone was making fun of me in class where they'd have to step in or anything. There were also teachers who were very supportive, like my Latin teacher. He's actually

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gay, and he's kind of a mentor, just because he is just such a friendly person. It was always comfortable and fun going to his class and being comfortable knowing I won't get teased here.

Did you come out to him?

Yeah. I don't know when, but yeah.

What about online? Did you try and find any support or information or anything?

I did. In middle school when I first recognized that maybe there was some attraction towards guys, I freaked out at first. I was like, "What's going on here?" So I'd go online, and there were some websites that were like, "Oh, it's normal for young guys entering puberty to have fantasies or imaginings about other guys, and it doesn't mean you're gay, it's just normal." And then after I realized, no, I'm definitely gay, it was trying to find as much as I could about the community, just because I have an insatiable hunger to know stuff about everything. It was also gay teen networking sites. That was more to just kind of talk to people. I think part of my intention of joining was in the hope that I'd meet someone, which I eventually did actually, that's how I met my first boyfriend.

So most of those coping strategies seemed to be pretty positive. Did you feel like there were any that were more negative?

None come to mind. I didn't smoke or drink or do drugs of any sort.

Do you feel like your gay identity and your identity as gifted interacted at all?

Kind of. I don't know how to explain it. Sometimes it was like... I don't know how to explain it.

You mentioned earlier trying to find out stuff about the community because you really liked knowing things. Do you feel like that had any other impacts on your identity, trying to know things?

I think so... Just learning about different things, like when I first came out, I first came out as bi and that had been, not really after researching, just kind of looking into it a little bit and just being like, oh, I think I have feelings for guys and girls. And then sometimes I think maybe I read about stereotypes and I don't know if it was "Oh, maybe I should do that," or "Oh, I do that, and I fit this stereotype, that's kind of awkward." But there was some interaction between how I acted and stereotypes, I think, at first.

What about now in college? What do you feel has changed, what stayed the same?

## Interview 6: Adam

I'm definitely more comfortable in my sexuality and my gender and how I express myself. Here I feel comfortable wearing heels sometimes, sometimes I wear definitely feminine clothing, sometimes when I go out on the weekends I like to wear eyeliner and sometimes other makeup stuff, and I know in high school or definitely middle school I never in a million years would have thought "Oh, eventually I'll maybe be wearing heels and makeup and be doing drag on occasion." But I feel that I'm comfortable enough in my sexuality and identity to know that that's how I want to express myself.

Did you want to express yourself in similar ways in high school and didn't because of the social repercussions, or it wasn't a thing in high school?

At first it was kind of like ignorance about drag queens and transgendered people. When I first thought that every trans people were drag queens. I didn't realize there was a difference until like sophomore year. And then...I always liked skinny jeans, which I guess are kind of feminine, not so much anymore, and then I definitely enjoyed wearing nail polish sometimes. My friends painted my nails for a school project one time and I really... We had to cross dress for an English project one time. We were reading Shakespeare's Twelfth Night, so my teacher tied it in, then she got in trouble for that because one of the kids wore a dress for school and security kind of stopped him and was like, "you can't wear that dress." Then in senior year I thought about it and it was like, "I definitely want to try to do drag," and I actually went to my senior prom in drag. I just kind of figured out and realized that this is how I want to express myself.

Are there other changes besides being more comfortable now that you're in college?

I guess my coping strategies kind of changed. In high school I did talk to my friends, I did talk to my mom, but I wasn't as open to talking about stuff or sharing information and I wasn't as open to their feedback. Here I'll call my mom or call one of my best friends back home and just talk, and just let everything out, and get the feedback and realize, "oh hey, I do need to change something."

What recommendations would you make to teachers, or institutional school practices?

Support GSAs, of course. Listen to the students, because I think a lot of teachers, or at least administrators, don't really do that, and be willing to talk to students and understand where they're coming from. Because I had two administrators who when I wanted to wear drag to prom my friends were like, "the administration will never say that's okay," but I went to them and they were willing to talk to me about it, and they were just like, "sure!" but you really have to talk to the students, I think. Not having policies that are restrictive in regards to expression. Like the kid wearing a dress to school and security

## Interview 6: Adam

stopping him—that was incredibly annoying to me and I think schools need to change their policies in regards to dress codes and things of that nature.

Interview 7: Kristen

When did you graduate from high school and how old are you?

May 2009; 20

How do you identify in terms of sexual orientation and gender identity?

I identify as a lesbian female.

When did you first realize you were a lesbian?

Probably when I was fourteen. I was a freshman in high school. Maybe before then, but that's when I really kind of put somewhat of a label to it.

How did that go? What did you feel and think?

Well I started dating a girl, and it's really weird because I met a guy online, I don't know how I met him, but he just happened to be best friends...he introduced me to my first girlfriend. He was a gay guy, and I didn't really know that people dated people that were the same gender. I didn't know it existed, I just thought it was something that was on tv sometimes, but I really didn't understand it. So that's why I somewhat put a label to it when that happened.

You just started dating this girl and you were fine with it?

I was fine with it, I guess because it just felt right. It just felt right. I really cared about her, and I felt like that's what you were supposed to have in a relationship.

When did you first come out to other people, besides obviously that girl?

I came out to my mom that year during my first homecoming in high school. When I first told her I told her, exact words, "I think I'm in love with a female," and she hugged me and all this stuff, and said she loves me no matter what, but... the girl that I was dating was a senior in high school, so she told me that if I didn't put an end to it she would. The next day, after the comforting, she told me she would put an end to it, and it just went downhill from there. But after I told her, I really didn't care who knew, so she told her mother, she told my grandma and everything, and she made me tell the rest of my family during Thanksgiving, because I guess she thought they were going to use Biblical references to tell me that it was wrong, because my family's really religious, both sides, but they were okay with it. I think they all thought it was a phase.

Did you come out to people at school?

Not after I had that whole big shebang with my parents. I didn't tell anyone, really. I was just walking around with this girl, and no one understood it, but they kind of felt like they

## Interview 7: Kristen

knew, but it probably wasn't until my sophomore year that I started coming out and telling everyone. I realized myself that I just didn't want to be with guys anymore. I don't know, one guy wrote on the bathroom door my name and that "[name]'s a dyke" or some shit. But it was a lot of mixed reactions, but my friends were okay with it, especially when we sat down and talked about it. But some people were really homophobic, not directly. A lot of indirect stuff.

When you started coming out to your friends were you pretty much out and everyone knew at that point, or was it still kind of secretive?

I was pretty much out.

Were you formally identified as gifted in school?

Yep. When I was in elementary school I was in the PATS program, which is Program for Academically Talented Students, and teachers recommend you for it if you're doing really good I elementary school. Then in middle school it was a magnet program, which is the middle school version of PATS, and its throughout the entire district, and in high school I took IB classes, so I guess that qualifies me as gifted?

For middle school, your whole school was gifted?

Not the entire school. I guess the people who did well... If you were in PATS in elementary school you were automatically in the magnet program, and some people tested into the magnet program, so they took tests that qualified them to be in it, but it was just maybe two classes in the entire school.

Were all your classes with those same people?

Yes. I saw the same people every day.

Did you feel like you were socially different from your peers for being gay?

Not really. Maybe less in middle school than high school because high school was when I started dating, so that made it kind of different, but no one really treated me differently.

What about for being gifted, did you feel different?

Oh yeah. Oh yeah... People would always talk about us because we were in the magnet program and PATS and IB. It was hard to be friends with people outside of the classroom setting. But I was in band, so I had cool band friends, but most of the people in band, if they weren't in advanced classes, they were smart too. I feel like a lot of people didn't talk to me because we were in gifted and talented programs. On the bus I got picked on once. This was in middle school. I think it was because I wore glasses, or I had my

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glasses on on the bus, but I really couldn't see without my glasses! My aunt had to come on the bus and talk to the bus driver, and it was really embarrassing, but these older kids were picking at me, and I think it was probably because of being in advanced classes, because they didn't know about my sexual orientation.

How did you feel about all of that?

I don't know. I could say I was angry, sometimes, but I don't think I really was because in the back of my mind I always knew that academics would get me further than them picking on me would. So I really didn't... maybe anger sometimes, like when my aunt had to come on the bus and embarrass me, but other than that, it felt great, especially getting awards during awards programs, and my mom being happy and my family being happy because my grades were good. It kind of kept me level sometimes. Sometimes it was bad.

When people did pick on you in high school indirectly for being gay, did that bother you?

It hurt my feelings. I never really talked about it, though. I never really talked about it because I couldn't talk about it with my mom, but when I heard my name was written on the bathroom walls, of course I was hurt. I kind of started holding grudges with people. I still do that now. It's so easy to say, "forget you, I don't need you in my life." For smaller things.

You were bothered by it, you couldn't really talk to anyone about it... did you talk to your friends about it?

About my sexuality?

About being bothered by other people.

In high school I did talk to someone about it. I didn't handle the situation with my first girlfriend; I didn't end the relationship like my mom told me to, and my mom handled it. She went to the law enforcement, and she tried to press charges against her. She was eighteen, and in South Carolina you can't partake in sexual activity under the age of sixteen, and freshman year I was fourteen. So I had to talk to different people in law enforcement. I remember talking to a guy with a uniform on in his office and then going in another room in this safe house and talking to some people about sexual things me and this girl had done, and that was embarrassing as shit. So yeah, I talked about it, but that didn't help really. It just made me feel really bad, and I felt like I was getting her in trouble. Then my mom made me go to a psychiatrist afterward, so I talked to him. His name was Dr. [name], for the record. He's an asshole. He just kind of threw the Bible at me. Not really threw the Bible at me because... I'm not really good with ethnicities, but

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he wore a turban on his head, and so I don't think he was Christian because he had a turban on his head, but he was throwing out Bible verses to tell me why homosexuality was wrong, so I never wanted to talk about it. Then at the end of our sessions he had the nerve to ask me if I wanted to have a family session with my mom, and I didn't even want to talk to my mom because I had to go through all that, so I didn't really talk about it much.

Do you think your mom did all that because it was a girl, or literally just because she was eighteen?

Probably both. Because now that I'm older I realize that if I had a child that was fourteen dating an eighteen year old, it would be a problem. It really is a problem, but my dad's five years older than her, so... But I think it really had something to do with being a girl. I don't think she could handle that for a long time. She still really can't handle it now to a certain extent. But I didn't really start talking about it in a productive way until college.

So you didn't talk to your friends in high school or anything?

Not really. I talked about relationships, but we didn't really get to the root of things.

Did you turn to other resources? Did you go online to try to find queer communities or information or anything?

No, I really felt like I was the only one going through that. Even though I knew other gay people, I didn't know there were resources until I got to college. I remember when I was a junior or senior, either my last year or the year before my last year in high school, this girl wanted to date me and we exchanged numbers, and back then you didn't have cell phones, you had house phones, and she was calling my house phone and hanging up, and calling my house phone and my mom's like, "who is this?" and she figured out it was a girl, and we got into a really bad physical altercation. That was the first time that ever happened, but it was bad, so I went to school the next morning crying and kind of bruised a little, and the girl slaps the mess out of me when I tell her to stop calling my house, and she's a freshman, and I had to call my mom and I had braces, and my lip was bleeding... I didn't touch the girl because I knew that if I touched her I would get in trouble, but I got in trouble anyway, and this was before the bell rung for classes to start.

Did they make you call your mom because you were fighting?

I wasn't fighting, but because we interrupted the school, some shit. The bell hadn't even rung yet! When my mom talked to the principal the principal mentioned something to her about starting an LGBT group. There's no fucking LGBT group there yet. My mom hadn't even said anything about it, but I guess he just insinuated that that's what the root



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of things were. That was the first time I had actually heard anything about a group. I guess LGBT people coming together to talk, or resources... I didn't even know they existed until he said that.

But he didn't encourage you to start one or anything, he just mentioned it to your mom?

No, of course not, and it's still not there. It was bad. My mom got in touch with the superintendent because he was rude to her anyway, and he wasn't talking to her, he was talking to her boyfriend instead of her, and her boyfriend is not my dad, so he was just being kind of sexist and an asshole. He is an asshole. That was the first time I knew resources existed.

Were teachers supportive?

Oh, yeah. In middle school, I didn't come out, but in high school the first teacher I told was my Spanish teacher. It was my freshman year, and we had to write sentences or bring sentences to class, and I would write something like, "my muchacha is muy bonita" or something like that, you know, write stuff about my girlfriend, and so one day, I don't know if it was during class when people were doing their work or after class, she talked to me and she had a map of Spain, I think, and she pointed to me the Island of Lesbos and showed me. She was just so cool and so supportive.

So she came to you, you didn't go to her?

No, I didn't go to her at all, and I think I wrote those sentences on purpose, but it was surprising that she came to me and it was really good.

Why do you think you wrote the sentences? What were you trying to accomplish?

I don't know, I just couldn't see myself writing "el muchacho" because that wasn't my experience.

You just wanted to not lie?

Yeah, I wanted to not lie.

Anything other teachers, good or bad?

I didn't have to tell my soccer coach. My soccer coach is an English teacher too, and senior year she would check on my grades because if I had close to a C, almost a C or something in the class, it was a problem. It was my mom's. She would say, "you can't go to soccer practice," and whatever, so the coach was trying to check on me. But on trips and stuff I guess I used to talk about girls a lot. I don't know if she overheard me, but she was cool about it, and it got to the point where we would write poetry and kind of battle

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each other, but write about our own feelings, and she never really questioned me, but she knew and she was cool about it. She'd say things like, I remember when I was a senior I thought this freshman was cute, she was on the soccer team, and I was talking to her, and after I talked to her my coach was like, "You're messing with that little girl," or something like that, so I knew she knew but she didn't really say anything. I was in band, too, and they probably knew, because one of my best friend's father was assistant band director, so I'm sure they knew. They didn't say anything. And I went back to see my middle school teachers when I was in high school and they found out, I don't know how in the world they found out, but two of my favorite teachers pulled me aside, came into one classroom and was like, "So [name], what is this I hear about..." I don't know what they said, but about liking girls, and is it true, and I don't think I ever answered them, I was so embarrassed. I don't know, I didn't know what to say, I didn't know whether to lie or not, but they knew.

But they seemed supportive about it?

I don't know, they just seemed... I don't know. They seemed concerned, not really supportive, but concerned, and I feel like they wanted to ask questions, whether I was just being a follower and liking females because other people were doing it, but I don't know. I just didn't have the courage to sit down and have that conversation with them.

Did you lie or did you just avoid it?

I just avoided it. I just kind of talked about other stuff and left. It was awkward. It was really awkward.

Were any teachers particularly unsupportive or hostile?

Not directly. No.

You did soccer and band... did you do any other extracurricular stuff?

We had sororities and fraternities at our school.

Was it private or public?

Public school. It was kind of like a Pan-Hellenic council, but like the NPHC organizations, majority Black Greek, but my organization was called [sorority], and we went through a pledging process, and I was the president my senior year, junior year, and we stepped, and won awards, raised a shit ton of money. We actually raised enough money to get the school one of those signs outside that scroll. Did a lot of community service in there. I was in National Honor Society, but I don't think we ever had meetings,

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and I don't know if that counts as extracurricular. I feel like that might be it. The core things.

Do you feel like your involvement with that stuff made you more socially fitting in?

Yeah, oh yeah. If I wasn't in them, I'd be lame. I'd be classified as lame, I think. Being in [sorority], we say [abbreviation] so I don't have to say the whole thing out, but when I was in that, I joined it my freshman year, second semester because you had to have a 2... some kind of GPA... maybe a 3.0 GPA to get in. It was the highest GPA, and so that organization kind of said "my grades are good, I'm not awkward, I can talk to people, I can step so I'm cool, I'm in a group with cool people." It was a cool organization, like the down to earth girls, the stereotype we're the down to earth girls. I knew girls that were in that organization when I got there that were gay, but in the closet, but I just knew because I was dating a senior who could tell me everything. Then being on band, I was on the marching band. I first started the marching band my last year of middle school, so coming to high school that kind of made me cool because I had already been there for a year before I got there. One of my best friends, her father was the assistant band director at the high school, and he was band director at the middle school, so I think it was just a policy that seniors could be on the marching band in high school if they were good enough, so it was maybe six of us. After school we'd go to the high school and have band rehearsal and go to competitions. That was cool for us because, middle schoolers, seeing us at the football games kind of gave us cool points.

Do you feel like your identity as gifted and your identity as a lesbian have interacted at all, or impacted each other at all?

I feel like they have. It's hard to say how. I just feel like the gifted part of me caused me to be inquisitive and ask questions, and helped me define who I was and then it helped me decide whether I wanted a label or not, then I took feminist theory in college and I just said, "Oh my gosh, maybe I should not even be calling myself a lesbian," so I feel like maybe they interact in that way. In high school, no. In middle school, no. But now, I feel like they do interact a lot.

Socially, how is it different now in college than it was in high school as far as people's perceptions of you being a lesbian and gifted?

It's different because we talk about it now. Usually in high school I was only talking about it with a select group of people, but now I talk about it with so many people from so many different backgrounds. Just a different perspective. I didn't even understand what... I knew what I was going through in high school, but I guess coming here freshman year, the first people I met were [name] and [name], and all they were telling

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me... I guess the environment was different socially. In high school, almost everyone in my high school was Black. It was like 98% Black when I graduated. Very religious, so when I came to college and it was the total opposite...It was just different. I talked about different things, I experienced different things, and now I just have different perspectives. Like I never heard of nipple equality before in my life, and I go back home and tell friends about that and they're like "What the hell?" and I get in finally, but I didn't get it freshman year. I was like, "what is going on?" And I get it now and it makes sense. ... College changed a lot.

Better? Different?

Different. Different isn't bad.

In high school, did you feel like there was a difference in the way people perceived you in the IB classes versus regular classes?

Yeah. In IB classes, we all looked at each other as equals. My sexuality wasn't really even a factor. Outside of IB, people outside of IB classes, I felt like they always looked down at us and they would make statements like, "Oh, they think they're better than us." So it was never really an equal playing field in our class, like class of 2009. In IB we took a class called Theory of Knowledge, and that class we kind of started arguing. We talked about different perspectives on different things. That's when we started learning fallacies. It was just different. Everyone had an open mind and no one really judged anyone. Outside of the class, it was just different. It was another world completely. Definitely judgmental. Some of the things we said in our Theory of Knowledge class we would never say outside of class, we would never take to the cafeteria, because people would probably be like, "What are they talking about?"

Most of the things you've been talking about were positive coping strategies. Do you feel like there have been negative ones?

In high school or college?

Both. Mostly high school.

I don't know if I can say I did this to cope. Maybe I just did it, I was being a follower and I wanted to do it, but I smoked weed for the first time in high school. Only once, really, and I got so high. It was after a soccer game. Oh, I smoked a lot! But that was the first time. After one soccer game I got really high with one of my soccer teammates and it was just great. It was a really good feeling, but I was paranoid as shit. I don't know if I did that to cope or not.

Did you do it to fit in, or just because you wanted to?

## Interview 7: Kristen

Maybe to fit in, maybe because I wanted to, but mostly to fit in because nobody that I was smoking with was in IB, so I don't think anybody in IB, if they were smoking they weren't telling anybody. So we smoked. And it was kind of with this one particular girl, and she was cool, everybody loved her, but she used to smoke a lot. One of the guys, I smoked with my cousin, and I was like, "Oh, I gotta do this." I don't know that I did it to cope. Negative things to cope, you said? Poetry's positive. I wrote a lot. My soccer coach wrote a lot too. I don't know. I don't know if I did this to cope, but sometimes, my mom, we'd get in really bad arguments about stuff, and I'd sit in my room, sit on the side of my bed on the floor, and just look out the window. That's not fucking negative at all, but I'd just look out the window and dream and stuff. Then in college I just went crazy, especially freshman year. I did a little bit of everything! I smoked a lot, I drank a lot, I threw up a lot... I was in ROTC and hated it. I didn't go to classes. As a result my grades showed how shitty my class attendance was... I think that's it.

Why do you think you did those things? Other than hating ROTC?

That was a big thing, but other than hating ROTC...

Do you think that contributed?

Yeah, ROTC definitely contributed a lot, but I think more so because I was gay in ROTC, I was out in high school and then I had to come in here and hide who I was again because of ROTC, so I just needed a release. Alcohol and drugs helped me out a lot. It wasn't really good, but...

What suggestions would you have for teachers or for schools to support institutionally?

I kind of feel like the main goal of teachers is to teach, but when a teacher goes above and beyond, like my Spanish teacher did, and just point out this place, I don't know anything about this place but I really want to go there some day, and to just tell me how welcoming and opening another country is. That small thing made my day, and I think would make any student's day if a teacher just pays attention to small things like sentences that are different or talk about a different sexuality. There were no resources in my high school and middle school, so if there was a pamphlet I could read, even though pamphlets aren't really that... don't really work that well, but for a high school or middle school student who just needs something, that works. I feel like the guidance counselors at my school only had one-on-one situations or relationships with students who didn't do their work at all, but the students in IB, we didn't have our shit together either. We had our academic shit together, but we didn't have the resources or the guidance counselors to talk to us about these things even though they knew what was going on. Clubs. I think my principal saying that he was thinking about starting an LGBT club... how many

## Interview 7: Kristen

years, three years later it's still not there... that would really help, not just me, but there are so many. I can see people who are seniors now at my high school who their facebook statuses are the most depressing shit of life, and I feel like if they had this community it'd be a lot better.

Why?

Because they wouldn't feel so alone. They could at least talk about it. But the only message I was getting was the religious message, and I was really religious at some point in my life. I think that's how I coped a lot, but then when I would sit there and hear the preacher say something about going to hell because of being gay, it was depressing and I had no one to talk to about this. I had no other perspectives. I had no one tell me that I didn't have to believe this, that this wasn't right, so I feel like just having a group where you can talk about ideas, and talk about feelings, and talk about what exists outside of this small place. I feel like that would help more than anything. I think I'd be a different person if we had a group like that.

You said you used religion to cope, but not so much with sexuality? You said that was negative.

In middle school, one of my favorite teachers used to always talk about god and all this Black shit, and I don't know what was her deal, but I loved her, she was a great teacher. So because she always talked about religion, I wanted to go to church. It was weird because my mom's mom was a Jehovah's witness, my mom didn't go to church, and then my dad's side of the family were Pentecostal, in holiness. So I would go to Kingdom Hall with my Grandma, and I would read the Bible and learn it, and I guess some of the scriptures really inspired me and made me humble myself and listen, and I wasn't talking so much in class. I used to talk a lot and I used to get in trouble for it, and the teachers would write their little things on your report card or whatever, but I really changed a lot and I feel like it helped me cope for a period of time. My grades were better, I wasn't talking as much, but then I couldn't handle the gay stuff. That really fucked me up. Everything else was good about the Bible to me, but that just fucked me up, because I couldn't sit there and act like the girl in the next aisle wasn't cute.

Interview 8: Chris

When did you graduate from high school and how old are you?

2009; 20.

I identify as a cisgendered gay man.

When did you first realize you were gay?

That's a really tough question. I think there's the difference between realizing and just kind of... I don't know. I would say in middle school was when it became pertinent to me.

What do you mean by that?

People were getting girlfriends and stuff, and I thought I needed to get a girlfriend, and there was never really any chemistry or anything, I had never kissed any girls or anything or hold hands or whatever that middle schoolers do, but I would say that looking back I know that I've been kind of weird, and... not weird, let me rephrase that. The ways in which I viewed men in my life, and peers, that kind of thing, throughout my entire life has probably been more like homosexually inclined than the normal person, if that makes any sense. It was just like it became a pertinent thing to me in middle school when I realized that I kind of needed to figure out what was going on.

When did you first come out to someone else?

Seventh grade? Seventh, eighth, somewhere around there. I'd say seventh.

Who did you come out to?

I came out to... it was eighth grade. I came out to a girl that I knew identified as bi in my English class. I came out as bi. That was... I feel like most people do that, because you still don't really know anything. Not that bi isn't a legitimate thing, it just isn't for me. So I'd say eighth grade was the first time I told one person.

And then after that?

Well, let me back up. There was an awkward conversation with my mom that I had in the seventh grade. She asked me... she did this thing when I was going through puberty where she would watch shows about sexuality and sex and like the Dateline NBC telling you "oh my god, this eighth grade girl doesn't think of a blowjob as sex, what is this world coming to?!" and then she would ask me if I was questioning my sexuality and or if I had questioned my sexuality, and I said "yeah." She told me she didn't think I was ready to make that kind of decision or whatever. And so I didn't talk to her about my sexuality until I came out in ninth grade. In ninth grade, I came out to everyone by dating like a senior. He was a flamer and I was like "ah yeaah" and I made out with him in the

Interview 8: Chris

halls and stuff because I was like, I see all the straight couples doing it, it was kind of like "alright, if I'm coming out, I might as well do the whole shebang." So I kind of got a lot of negative attention. By kind of I mean a LOT.

Did you come out to anyone in between the first bi girl and making out in the hallways?

Friends.

In middle school?

Eighth grade. And the beginning of freshman year I came out. So yeah. But like the people that I interacted with.

Could you elaborate on the negative attention?

Oh man. Like, where I lived it was... I mean, when I first came out, I couldn't switch classes without being called a fag or queer. People would... it was a pretty large campus, there were like nine buildings. I live in a pretty conservative area, we have like drive your tractor to school days, lots of farm people...

That sounds like an awesome day!

Yeah, well... so anyway, I would get called names all the time. It was not unheard of for me to kind of like have a few people like shooting questions at me. In a kind of angry/I wanna learn about this just so I can know exactly why I don't like you kind of thing... like in gym class. Gym class was aaaawful. Gym class was just... somehow I'd always get all the douchebags in my gym class. Somehow they would crawl out of the woodwork and I'd have to deal with these assholes calling me names or whatever. So just general name-calling, I was never... there were times when I felt physically unsafe, but I was never physically harmed. So it was mostly just name-calling and kind of fear of acting a certain way around people, that kind of thing. I don't know if that really answered your question but...

Yeah. When you were afraid of acting a certain way around people, did that change the way you acted?

It was more... I still, really until college, I didn't really feel comfortable talking about... it was kind of like "gay" became a label for me and not necessarily an identity. Like I couldn't really... maybe a couple of girls I could talk about how I thought someone was cute, but I would NEVER say anything within earshot of people I didn't trust or that could be homophobic. And also I dated a lot of guys in high school even though I was kind of... I was probably one of five guys that was out in ninth grade. And by senior year I was probably one of 5-10 guys that were out in the school of 2200 people. And I think just people... the reason I dated so many people was that they kind of flocked to me? They would come out to me, because I kind of became this mentor of sorts. And because



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I was, y'know, the sexually frustrated... not frustrated, but a sexual high schooler, I would usually take interest. And so I wouldn't PDA, even though I went through that phase in my ninth grade year, but... I didn't necessarily feel safe in high school? But I felt there would be repercussions if something happened to me. But if I went on a date like somewhere... I remember one time... a few times, but one time in particular... with a guy. We went on this big star in Roanoke, this man-made star that's like lit-up, it's just a fun place to take a date. And we were like... we felt like an overpass right off the parkway, and we were just kind of making out in his car. And then this car just kind of pulled, this big red truck, just pulled in to the same overlook, and parked on like the opposite side of it? And I think maybe they shined a light at us or something, or maybe their headlights illuminated us when they came in. And then there was this really creepy... it was 11 o'clock, so we drove away to another overpass to get away from this person? And they followed us to the next one. And I was just so afraid... there were a few chance encounters like that, where I was like really afraid. Because there wasn't... there weren't people around. So I guess in a way I felt somewhat safer at school, but it was just more because I knew that there was something holding people back. Because still if you beat someone up in the high school, you're still gonna get suspended, no matter how homophobic the administrators are.

Did the PDA in high school continue?

They calmed down, and I also got to a point where I wasn't dating people at the high school anymore. At the same high school. Also, I knew there was a direct correlation between like... we're talking like, the PDA would... I did it less and less. It got more like passing notes, seeing one another... thinking back, it was maybe like a peck on the lips or something? But it never got to where it was freshman year. This... there was always a direct correlation between me visibly dating someone at school, and people calling me names and making fun of me or saying hateful things. I think it was just because there was ... the difference between just being labeled, and actually acting out the identity. The identity threatened people more than the label.

So the fact that you were dating someone, you felt people were threatened by that?

It made it more real for them. It wasn't like a skate parody, it was like a bad skate parody kissing a guy, and I'm not cool with that. If that makes sense.

How did teachers react to you and to the people calling you names?

I would say 75%... okay 95% of the time, teachers did not step in. Like, we're talking like people screaming "fag" at me down the hallway, past multiple teachers, because teachers had to be out in their doorways during hall time, to make sure things didn't happen or whatever. And they wouldn't step in or say anything. I do remember there was this one guy, the only person that I legitimately still feel hatred towards... I had so much bottled up rage from this one guy. It was every day in tenth grade, him and his cronies would be waiting at this one spot that I had to walk past to get to this building. These two buildings

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were side-by-side, and there was this breezeway, and they'd wait in the breezeway. Sometimes he was with friends, sometimes he wasn't, and every day he would say shit to me. He would do this kind of... either mean-spirited things, or he started getting into this... he would rub on my chest or something. It was kind of like borderline sexual harassment, like homoerotic, when's he going to hook up with a guy, sort of thing? Looking back... But I remember going to a teacher who is very Christian, telling her that he was bugging me on the way to her class... I told her I was gay, I didn't know if she knew, I didn't know how many teachers know... you know, teachers are much more aware than students think they are. So I don't know who knew. But this one teacher I said "I identify as gay, this guy keeps bothering me, it's really starting to..." I told her that I basically had a choice between beating the shit out of him, and not failing this year. And getting into college, getting out of here, not having to deal with more assholes. That was the legitimate choice I had. I was bigger than him, and I had enough bottled up rage that I could have beaten the shit out of him. I would daydream about it every day, but I just couldn't, because of our school policy that you get kicked out for 10 days if you get in a fight, and if you miss 11 days of a class, you fail it. So there was a legitimate choice between my career, my future, and like dealing with this asshole. One thing that sticks out with me... and anyway, she had him in another class of hers. She gave him the "come to Jesus" talk. And he toned it down, he wasn't touching me anymore, but it was still every day.

Did you tell the teacher again, or just leave it?

I just left it. I guess if he wasn't touching me, I could deal with it. I dealt with so many insults at that point that it would just kinda bounce off. His were especially grating, because it was like he had already established that asshole relationship, so I could just hear him say something in his voice. It would just piss me off, even though it was just like "Hey [name]" as I passed, it would still grind my ears

Sounds highly unpleasant!

...Yeah.

Going back, you said you sort of became a mentor to all the other people who came out to you. Can you elaborate on that?

Because I was a visibly gay person, so, okay, my dad was a teacher. And my grandfather on his side, my grandfather was a bricklayer, my mom was a tax lady, typical country couple with three children. Before that he was also director of the county Parks and Recs. So needless to say our surname is pretty well-known. Names that you know in the county that are really well-known, they're just sort of household names of the county. Ours is one of them. When I came out... both my brothers were star athletes. They're a head taller than me, and were pretty good at basketball and football. And so I would kind of laugh, I didn't do any of the contact sports. I did track and cross country, and later on, theater. So needless to say, when I came out, it was kind of a shock. Because there was this

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established way that [names] did things, that was like sports and women. Then I came along. It spread like wildfire, and the way that I ended up coming out to my parents was because my brother heard about me kissing a guy, because people started making fun of HIM, because his younger brother was being gay. And so he called my parents and told them. So the way I had to deal with it... my parents are divorced, I was living with my mom, so the way that I had to deal with it was dad calling me out and kind of chastising me and saying like "I shouldn't be making this decision, I'm too young," whatever. And he didn't talk to me for months. ANYWAY, the reason I'm building all this up, was because I was visible. People knew who I was. I still had established a pretty... I had a group of friends who were cool with it. And I was still friends with the majority of straight guys back home. So they saw me as this kind of guy who was putting up with all this shit at home because of it, and at school, and was still doing just fine and doing well in my classes. And enjoying what I could out of high school. I think also a couple of them had ulterior motives and wanted to date me anyway! But there were plenty of people... I would get myspace messages asking me "How do I come out to my parents?" "Should I come out?" And back then I was very pro-coming out, no matter the circumstances, because I'd been through hell. But I know now it's more of a logistical maneuver, make sure you're safe and have money. But back then I was like "fuck it, do it, I did it." No more than 10, but upwards of 5, guys. Always guys asking me for advice about it. You could have the butchiest butch butch couple... I remember this one where I don't think they got shit because everyone thought one of the girls was a guy. But lesbian couples, they never got ANYTHING. Seriously! I still don't understand this double-standard. I'm talking like, I dealt with so much shit, and I'd see girls holding hands, and I guess they just kinda looked badass and could kick your ass or whatever, and generally they weren't really... I didn't really know very many lesbians, but I saw the ones around. I knew that they were there. Or at least bi, I know some identified as bi, but they were still like "I'll kick your ass" kind of people, so they didn't get shit, I guess. I think if I recall correctly there was this one guy who got his ass beaten by one of them, and so that was that!

So you said how your dad reacted when you came out, how did your mom react? The second time, after the seventh grade thing.

My mom was kind of shocked... the hard part about it was, you're also going through puberty, and you hate your parents, that kind of thing. But she reacted much more warmly. My dad has since come around the most that he can. Mom... it took a long while for mom to be positive. I think things are finally calming. Both sides, everything was pretty much normal. Though I still feel kind of "othered" within my family. My identity is never gonna be as reflexive for them as it is for me. My mom still likes to forward me things like "oh, look at this gay person doing gay things," you know, really tries to connect with me over it. She knows that I'm really active. Whereas my dad is still pretty clueless. I think.. he knew one of my boyfriends because my stepmom worked with his mom, and so he really knew of him. And other than that, he doesn't even know that I'm in a relationship now, he's never met any of my boyfriends, he's just generally apathetic towards it. I don't know how... at some point you're gonna have to cross the bridge of bringing somebody home, or whatever. It's kind of weird, because he's so indifferent

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about it, so I want to make sure I'm making the exact right choice before I bring somebody home. I don't want him seeing me going through the trials and tribulations of dating. It's so weird, it's this sort of really weird dynamic in which I'm desiring acceptance from the least accepting person. Whereas if my mom didn't approve of somebody, I'd be like 'fuck off,' but because dad is so indifferent, I feel like I need to change his mind. That's kind of how I felt, and I think that's part of growing up where I did, was... for a long time, my tactical maneuver was getting to know someone first before I came out to them, so there was no reason that they couldn't be friends with me. I didn't have any gay guy friends at home, they're all straight, but when I come to college I kind of have more of a queer group of friends that are mostly... I don't know. But I do have a good ability with making straight friends, or at least fitting in with straight guys, more than others. I can be one of the guys. I don't know if that's a positive thing, some people think it's a positive thing. I like being able to hang out with all kinds of people, so that's good for me. Mom was generally accepting after a while, and dad was.. I've probably spoken to him about my identity once or twice since coming out.

Totally switching gears, you identified as gifted in school?

Yes, elementary school. I think even back as far as kindergarten, I was given math problems while everyone else was drawing. First grade, part of the day I would go take a second grade class. All the way up the line I was in a gifted program. When you get to high school, you basically had the option of taking an accelerated math path through high school. So I was on that until calculus, and then calculus was only taught at the AP level, and I really grew to dislike math. A lot of my teenage existential angst came out in my math classes, that was where I wouldn't do my work or would just read and be "fuck off". I kind of had a fuck off attitude like 75% of the time.

Only in math, or in other things?

People I didn't know... I did an emo goth phase, where I was wearing black and eyeliner... fought with my mom, was like "I want to paint my nails!" (This is so weird, reliving this.) I just kind of ... also being smart made me another kind of target. But I'm sure we'll get to that in your interview.

So you had the accelerated math. Were all the other classes... did you have IB or AP or..?

I took AP history starting junior year, and senior year I took AP English and biology. All of the other ones were math, I believe. I could have taken AP chemistry, but I didn't want to take it at the same time as AP bio. Otherwise there was just AP statistics and AP calculus. The only two other AP classes were math ones, because we had a very limited AP program. They've expanded it since.

Did you do any other gifted programs or activities?

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Yes. A big big big part of my life, a part that is still a big part of my life, is the Johns Hopkins Center for Talented Youth. I don't know how the fuck they found me, I live in kind of a backwater area.

It's a talent search... they search for you!

Well, they got in touch with me, they let me know that... like, this math program started in middle school. I was taking algebra in sixth grade. But they said everyone in math class got it, and one or two other people... the way you get into it is to take SAT tests. My mom encouraged me to do it, and I think it was because my grandfather/her stepfather, he taught at Johns Hopkins as a graduate chemistry professor. I think she was really gung-ho about it, it wasn't a scam or whatever. When we got the thing in the mail, talking about all the different programs you could take...the price was like \$3,000. I was just like living with my mom, who is on social security and disability. (She has an autoimmune disease). I knew it was an impossibility. But I took the SATs and scored at or above the average... the requirement for the program was at or above the average of a college-bound senior. I was like a 1040. I applied for financial aid, and they gave me a free ride to this summer camp. So for five summers, I went to different Johns Hopkins Center for Talented Youth camps. I did marine physics and engineering, the Chesapeake bay oysters and estuary systems.... those were in Boston. I did one in Hawaii that was oceanography. I did one in Baltimore that was essentially social justice. It's through the civic leadership institute and northwestern, it was a partnership between the two institutions... we're talking, like, I was in the minority because I couldn't speak more than one language, I was a minority because I was white... they had comprehensive... I was trained as an RA, I worked for them over the summer, and they had comprehensive programs where they teach you how to deal with LGBT identities. And my coming out process was always much faster at camp. Everything's accelerated, because you're living with these people 24/7, and everyone's smart, and that kind of thing. Anyway, it was just amazing for me, and the world opened up at that point to this program for me and I knew once I went to that camp, I wouldn't have to be stuck in [county] county. I would be able to go somewhere else, there was a bigger, more interesting, accepting world out there that I just needed to find.

So did you feel, back in regular school, did you feel different from your peers for being gifted?

Yes. It took me a while for me to realize that I was very showy about my intelligence. I know there's a lot of gifted students

Yes. It took me a while for me to realize that I was very showy about my intelligence. I know there's a lot of gifted students now that feel that need. There were many times... I still know that I'm smarter than some of my teachers. I would just be generally rude... it's still very hard to earn my respect when... if my disagreements with you are based off of your ignorance, it's really hard for me to respect you. It's just... having respect... I don't

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know. That's getting a little more philosophical. But I was definitely targeted, and people wouldn't argue with me as much. They would just kind of accept the things that I said. People would generally, as far as the discussion front and argument front, would never pick on me in a way in which I could retaliate, especially on an intellectual ground. I remember once or twice when that happened, and it was like "everyone shut the fuck up" because I made good points. There was this one guy who was really Christian in my statistics class, and he was one day asking me... like, picking at me about my sexuality, and talking about the Bible and all that sort of stuff. And that's when my tiny little arsenal of knowledge that I had in the 11th grade, I was like "well, there are other things in Leviticus that you ignore as a Christian... do you eat shrimp, do you eat pigs," that sort of thing. "Do you just get to grocery shop for what things you decide to enforce and what you don't?" And he was like "you don't know what you're talking about!" and the class got really quiet. This teacher entertained political debates in his statistics class, because he was tenured and didn't care. I was definitely, all through elementary school, middle school, until I did a lot more sleeping in class because I figured out I could just be disinterested and still pass. Well, not pass, but still get As. But I didn't have friends until I learned to bite my tongue. Intelligence, especially where I was, is not as celebrated as other things. Y'know, if you can throw a football or hit a baseball really well, or... sports, sports, sports. You work on a farm, or those kind of things, manly things. That's really valued. But when you're intelligent and synthesize information really quickly and don't have to try at school, it's like you're an asshole. You're just a show-off. And it's still that way, in a lot of ways. When I get home I do a lot of smiling and nodding, and people are really polite, but y'know you can't correct anyone, it's taken personally, like you're attacking them. If you attack someone intellectually you're attacking someone personally, because people don't really think much about their beliefs. Whereas if everything's just taken at face value, so nothing is really analyzed, the moment you do that and correct whatever people try to say, y'know, you're an asshole.

You've kind of answered this, but if you want to add anything else: did you feel different for being gay?

Yeah, I did, and I still do. I think the one thing I really struggled with, and still do now, is... is just being unable to connect with straight people on queer stuff. This is tying back into the... y'know, it was a lot easier for me to be labeled a gay person, than it was for me to act out my identity or talk about anything... it took me a very long time for me to even be comfortable saying something like "oh, he's hot," just because I felt like I was just being judged. And even now, I feel like it's the reverse, where people take pointed interest in my romantic life because they don't want it to seem like they're ignoring me... does that make sense? But on the other side of that, is how I felt in high school, like I didn't want to offer anything because I didn't want to feel under the microscope. I just wanted to live like everyone else, and it's really difficult to do that.

So obviously lots of people teased you for it. Were your friends relatively okay with it?

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Yeah, they were pretty cool with it, and I really admire my friend [name], he's, it's kind of funny... I have... somehow a lot of my friends are transplants, so they're not actually natives to [county] county, so [name] grew up [place] until 8, when he moved down.. and just generally like the people that I'm friends with, not because of any other motivations or anything, are a little bit wealthier. Like their parents are more educated, so they're generally more accepting of me. But [name] did a lot in terms of stuff that I didn't see, conversations I'll never hear about, just defending me. And him and I were friends since middle school, and still are, and I'm just like one of his family back home. And sometimes like his father is more of a father to me than my own... but he would just defend me, and I ended up meeting friends through [name] because people realized that my best guy friend was a straight guy, and was clearly cool with it. Looking back, it was just amazing that in high school I had a straight guy friend. I would say it's... he's like an ally, y'know. I dunno, it's kinda weird. But I would say my friends were pretty accepting, and especially as they come to know me for a long time, it's certainly become not an issue at all. Just kind of another thing about me, y'know. And sometimes I am the butt of jokes, but whatever, I can deal with it.

So how did you cope with people teasing you for various things, gifted and gay?

I focused on my small group of friends... I really developed and cultivated the relationships that I had. I really connected with teachers, like not all of them, but the ones that I did, I mean... I remember senior year, we had this thing called volunteer public service, so for an hour and a half every day I was a volunteer for the athletic secretary, who was really nice and really awesome. I worked my ass off for 'em, but when I didn't have anything to do, I would just go to the library and hang out with Mr. [name]. And librarians tend to be more read and more liberal, and... I never talked about my identity with them, but we would just get together and rag on Sarah Palin, and y'know. There's probably one in every grade that I connected with and at first there was, in middle school years, I was called teacher's pet, and all I was capable of befriending was adults, because I wasn't being judged as much. And they were probably making conscious efforts to make sure that I didn't feel like a loner. And I would say after that, I still connected with adults in a lot of ways. I felt like I held my own talking to adults, a lot better than I did with students, just because I couldn't connect with them. And they encouraged questions, so... It was friends and adults, essentially, and I really focused on my studies... it was like my studies were the only way out of that hellhole, so that's what I did, I wasn't like going home and studying every day because I didn't need to, I graduated with a 3.8 or something, I didn't need to study. I slept in class and was a smartass or whatever. I would just... I always got my work done, and then I would go to sleep.

Did you come out to any teachers?

...I would say, one or two? I didn't feel the need to, I also didn't want to be judged by teachers. That is not to say that I didn't think there were teachers that didn't know. But I don't know which ones knew and which ones didn't. And I still don't know how obvious or whatever I am, and I don't know if I act any different than the way that I did in high

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school... I connected with teachers on an intellectual level first, and so as far as my emotional development and romantic development, teachers weren't really involved, so I didn't feel the need to come out to them. But I feel like the ones who would've felt that they needed to know something like that, probably did. I mean, it was no secret, I wasn't hiding it from anyone.

Why did you feel like you wanted to be so open about it?

That's a really good question. I don't really know. I think I've always had a very.. I don't know where this comes from, but I... I'm kind of self-righteous, and I'm really above all things, I think that hypocrites are just the scum of the Earth. I can't stand hypocrisy and I knew I could not live any way that wasn't the way that I am. And it was worth it to me to put up with all that bullshit than it was for me to never have been romantically involved or never figured out things about my identity or, y'know, been in a relationship with a girl and just have a miserable life. I just.. I've always been able to sort of, just my own personality, I really take an objective view to a lot of things, and really weigh pros and cons. So to me, I just wanted to be out of the closet, I was just tired of hiding and lying and having friends who I knew weren't really friends.. because I had to hide so much from them, and so just for me it was just a matter of being out of the closet was much more worth it and if I was gonna be out of the closet, I mean I wasn't like glitter and heels every day, I wasn't shouting it from the rooftops all the time, but I didn't hide it. There were particular times when I felt like I had to hide my identity because I felt like I wasn't in a safe space. I probably haven't felt that way in a while; generally it's when I go back home and I'm not hanging out with friends... just make sure not to say anything. It's also that older people in (county) aren't as hateful as people my age? They might want us to all burn in hell, but they're not gonna facilitate that process. They're not gonna chase after you, they're just gonna think that we're ruining the stars and stripes, that kinda thing.

Any other coping strategies you can think of?

The internet was a great place. I don't think I could have done it without the internet. Even if it was just going to a gay chat room or something, and just like pretending to be an 18 year old from Texas or something and cybering... or googling stuff about my identity or that kinda stuff. Or even figuring out what the mechanics of sex were... there's just a lot of... I remember there was this one guy who went to (college), and he... somehow he friended me on myspace or whatever, back when myspace was cool, and I was out on my myspace (that was another way I was out to people- I had it up there if people friended me on myspace, so I was able to control people who knew). There was another thing, the coming out process is so much easier because you can mass disseminate it. There are people that come out in their status on facebook, and kudos to them if that's what they want to do, but my philosophy has been that if they want to know it, they can look at that sexuality area on your profile. So anyway, long story short, the internet is a very useful tool. You're able to kind of gauge people, like how you think they're gonna react to your identity based on what they like, I mean, there's definitely judging. But that's the cover they want you to see, so I think there is some merit to that.



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In terms of me coping with my identity, the internet was a haven. I was really into (still am) into Massive Multiplayer Online Roleplaying Games (MMORPGs). So I was sort of able to also forge an avatar identity... I was never like in the character or anything, but I was able to forge friendships based on a new identity in a game with other real players, but really you're just becoming friends with them as a player. It was a lot of escapism, I don't know if that was the best thing, but I think I turned out pretty well-rounded. That was kind of also an interesting arena to also come out to people, like after you're friends with someone for a while, you kind of come out to them. It was kind of a testing ground for you to come out to people. Long story short, the internet was a great place for me to toy around with coming out with not having to exist as a gay person where I was. I could exist as a gay person in a sex chatroom or just exist as just a non-sexual person doing whatever and just talking to people.

You've pretty much gone down my list of coping strategies, which is good! I'm gonna take a wild guess that you didn't have a GSA at high school.

No, I tried to make one over winter break 2 years ago, sent a well-thought-out letter to (teacher).... this is a fun story for you. As I said, I have a pretty fuck-you attitude towards people that I thought were assholes, especially... You kind of know the way that I function in Lambda, which is a lot of figuring out if there's a problem who can help me fix it. I know bureaucratic rights and wrongs, like I know when someone's overstepped their bounds, I couldn't do something about (name) every day, but I could do something about an administrator or teacher or something like that. This one day I was walking down the hallway, and it wasn't in hall time or whatever, this administrator Mr. (name) was talking to these students and they were just kind of walking and talking. Then all of a sudden all the students which were four guys split off to go into the bathroom, and they kind of had to end their conversation, because they were just kind of shooting the shit or whatever. And Mr. (teacher) said something along the lines of "You better watch out, all you guys going in there at once, you might start some rumors!" And I was like, "I can't believe he said that!" So my first reaction was to go to the principal of the school and I was like "I don't think what he said was appropriate, why does it matter, why would he think that's something funny to joke about? What kinds of other things is he saying when I'm not present," yadda yadda yadda. And then like that was on Friday and he was off on Monday, and I remember bitching to my mom about it, and I remember all my friends being like "Dude, you're overreacting, it was just a joke," and I just felt really righteous about it. He shouldn't be able to say that kind of stuff. Those kinds of jokes are what makes it okay for those kids to turn around and say shit to me. It creates that environment. Anyway, he called me into his office on Tuesday and apologized profusely and was just like "my goal is to make it up to you before you graduate" (it was my senior year), "I felt really bad about it, I'm actually really liberal, I don't know what came over me, blah blah blah". So anyway I sent him a letter over winter break basically calling in a favor, like "why don't you start a GSA, there are resources I can provide, but you can't have outside parties start the group, it has to be student-directed, and by the time you're in college the connections to high school are limited. And people would join one if there was one, but not start one themselves.

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Good try!

Yeah.

You said you did track and cross country? What about other extracurriculars?

I did track, indoor track, and cross country (or a combination of them) from seventh grade to tenth grade. And then all of my friends, like (name) and I did track together, and we just had a lot of fun because there were so many fucking idiots on there. And (name) is just a really good troll, like he would just make fun of people without them knowing, and it was always a game for us. It was just fun to kind of... cross country it was just like "run through town for forty minutes," so we'd just go run and fuck off and go to McDonald's or something. Just being shithead teenagers. That was always fun. But then people would be like "you should really join drama, it's a lot more fun, we're accepting," and that kind of thing. And drama is always, no matter what school you go to, it just attracts queer people. I don't know if there's some formulaic reason for that, but... I did theater. I did a one-act play in the fall, and a musical in the spring. We did pretty well, we won the regional high school competition when I was a junior. It was a really good place and I was definitely out to all those people, and like directors were cool with it, so that was definitely another really safe place for me. And that's why I was so involved with it, because it was just a place where I could be myself. At least, between scenes.

Those were all relatively positive coping things; do you feel like there were any negative coping strategies you used?

I don't know if my general angst was worse than others, but I know that I was an absolute asshole to my mom. It was just all the time, I was yelling at her, we were fighting, or she would ask me a question and I would just snap at her. I was really... I don't know how she put up with it. I was really a shithead to my mom. And I still feel bad. I don't really know I was towards my dad, like we're pretty estranged from one another during my high school years and have only recently kinda reconnected. And I also had the tendency to be really moody towards... like if I couldn't put up with a teacher, for instance, (I never got sent to the office,) but I just always challenged small-minded people. I dunno if that's like a negative thing, but I was never really suicidal, I was never destructive, I never really got into drugs or anything like that... I just generally did a lot of compartmentalizing so I didn't take the full brunt of things. I found the safe places, I did the... I just had a lot of positive coping mechanisms that I think leached away from all the negative things I could have done.

Do you feel like the social situation surrounding being gay was better in your AP classes or CTY?

Yeah. I mean, short answer, yes. Those are the girls I would talk to about guys, those were more often than not the more liberal teachers or whatever. But those people, I don't

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know what the correlation is, I don't know... I don't know if it's just smart people tend to be more open-minded, or if their parents raised them any differently, but these classes certainly have the kids whose parents made more money. We have this one area in (county) with a large man-made lake, just to power our hydroelectric dam, but it turned into this big real estate boom, so there are multimillion dollar houses, but there are also people living in poverty in the same county, living in their single-wide with their crackhead parents or whatever. But the socioeconomic representation in that class was absurd, like totally white except for one black guy in my AP English class, who is just brilliant. He's now at MIT, which is like unheard of for my school. And my gifted group was extremely gifted, and I think it also was that because the AP program was so small (25 seats to a class, one class per subject, year-long), you really only got the top top percent, like the people... I'm pretty sure every single one of the people in my AP History class passed the AP exam, which is not normally how AP classes work. Usually you have a bell curve. I'm rambling once again, but I feel like people were more accepting, I was more able to talk to people about my identity than elsewhere. It was also because I had people on my same intellectual level, but those people also tended to be more accepting.

Do you feel like your gifted identity and your gay identity interacted at all?

I feel like my gifted identity has encouraged me to seek places in which I try and I change, whether it be of the paradigms of people around me, or doing stuff at Lambda, those kind of things. I don't think I would be empowered to be co-president of Lambda if I hadn't done the things I did earlier in life. So I'd say in that respect my gifted identity feeds into improving my LGBTQ identity. And I would say the other way around, my gay identity affected my intellectual identity... that's a tough question. I will say that I think that smarter spaces for me tend to be more welcoming spaces. I would say it's just more about the spaces and where I'm able to have those identities, like I feel like they're pretty compatible with one another. I don't feel like there's... there are places I can go to be just gay with superficial people, and I can also find pretty easily gifted ones.

How are things different now that you're in college?

Well, I'm more queer. What do you mean by different?

Socially.

Socially, I can find a group of queers if I want to... I would say it's still... I still get upset, it's not like a personal emotional upset, it's more I just wish that the LGBTQ community/the queer community was not so still stratified, and some people are so not represented. And I'm not saying that if you're queer you need to come to Lambda, but I feel like there are just people who go incognito in college, either because they're struggling with their identity, or because they're in situations where they're not confronted with or confronting their identities... you know, greek life, sports, heteronormative spaces... but I would say for me, as the type of queer that I am, I've been able to find worlds of resources and knowledgeable people and ways for me to express my desire for

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change for the queer community, my desire to connect with other queer people, and for other queer people to see if there's like a great big world out there that there are wonderful spaces for them, but I would say, that so, for me, my college experience for me, in terms of queer identity, has been very positive. Especially after hearing my litany of things about high school, but I would say that's not the case for everyone.

Last question: Ideally, the goal of this research would be to make things better for middle schoolers and high schoolers. So what suggestions would you have, either for teachers, or institutionally for schools.

Well, there's lots of things, if you want to hear them all. Firstly, and this just pops into my head: sex education that includes queer people! The only way I found out about how to have gay sex safely and responsibly was online. Either reading things or watching porn, like that's a really effective way to learn how to have sex, right... is by watching porn. I would say that teachers just assume that everyone in the room is straight. They'd say "oh, fellas!" and laugh about a girl being hot, or something like that. I would say institutionally, teachers... it just can't be cool or condoned anymore to just not think or talk about queers. I mean, I remember talking to my director when I was in drama, she was a middle school teacher but did high school theater stuff, and she brought that up. She said to a guidance counselor, "hey, so there's lots of students that identify or tell me that they're bisexual or gay or lesbian; how should we be dealing with students like that?" And this administrator said "Oh, well I'm sure that there are," and just moved on. There's this condoned silence about it. I think the dream-come-true would be the department of education changing the standards on how, firstly, guidance counselors need to know as much as there is to know about all these other things and queer identity. I didn't feel like I could talk to my guidance counselors in high school, not at all! There was no institutional... no visible ally network, I didn't know who I could talk to, there were no student organizations, so... I think that teachers need to know the lingo, even if it's just rudimentary knowledge, they need to just assume, because it's a very safe assumption, that every single class they have has at least one queer person. And that's a large demographic (at least for me) to know shit about. There are lots of other minorities that teachers learn how to deal with... but I would say that teachers need to be educated, and they're not.. and teachers also have to hold each other accountable. Like, there's no real mechanism for teachers to kind of... well, maybe there is, but it didn't seem to me that teachers who were especially bigoted were confronted in any way by the administration, or that other teachers didn't feel the need for that. Also, in athletics... oh my god. So much homophobia! Just there'd be two guys horsing around, and this one coach would make some Brokeback Mountain joke, and everyone would just laugh riotously. I didn't feel like being out, like I felt threatened in the locker room, like I just needed to stare at a corner, because people would've just thought my wandering eyes... I just feel like especially those spaces, in the athletics spaces, people need to be hyper-aware and also aware of the... because there's definitely this very boys-will-be-boys attitude towards bullying. And I know that I was able to cope with it in an effective way (for me), but that's not the case for everyone. And you can just be tormented relentlessly, and they'd be like "stop horsing around," but it wouldn't be "let's get to the root of this, why are you

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making fun of him, why are you saying the words that you are?" In other words, more cognizance of bullying and the LGBTQ community, and the knowledge that there are always queer people around you. Effective resources for people to learn how to come out, how to identify, guidance counselors need to know how to talk about these things... sexual education isn't preventative to learning about queer sex. Identifiable allies in every place.

How would you suggest they be identifiable?

Something akin to Safe Zone, I think. Can you imagine how different my high school experience would have been if there were stickers on doors, y'know? Just saying "hey come in." I would have found a reason to talk to those people, but instead I had to do this stupid song and dance to find out who was cool about it and who wasn't. So I think having some sort of training, some sort of Safe Zone something-or-other, would be ideal. Having a GSA, and I know that that has to be student motivated, but student-motivated just means one student says "I would join a GSA," and a teacher says "Hey, there's this dude who wants to do this, can I use these resources" and take it and run with it. My god, I was in this stupid fucking history club that was started from scratch and was absolutely pointless, just a reason to get out of class on club day, and I don't know what mechanism you would use to establish GSAs in places, but I think it should just be easier. And you shouldn't have to feel like some deviant or feel like you have to sneak around to find people who are cool with who you are. A lot of my high school years was spent worrying about what people were going to think of me, like "can I come out this person," blah blah blah. When just a sticker would be cool.

Do you have anything you want to add?

I think it's cool that you're doing what you're doing. I think that I have seen a correlation between queer spaces and intellectual spaces, and I don't know if they feed one another, and I don't really know what you're aiming at with your thesis, but it sounds like it's a lot of fun.

It is! I appreciate you taking time out of your day to answer these questions.

Interview 9: Kelley

When did you graduate from high school and how old are you?

2011; 18

How do you identify in terms of sexual orientation and gender identity?

Gender identity is female and I am bisexual.

When did you first realize you were bi?

I was first able to admit it to myself when I was fifteen.

How did you feel about it?

I was not very happy. I was a very strong Catholic at the time and I just saw it as some form of temptation that I didn't want to deal with.

When did you first come out to other people?

I came out to my sister pretty soon after that, and my mother probably right before I turned sixteen. Some of my very close friends sort of scattered throughout that time.

Was your sister the first person?

Yes.

How did everyone take it?

My sister and my close friends took it pretty well. My mother... she somewhat accepted me but she also spent a lot of time giving me articles about bad things that happen to gay people and telling me I shouldn't come out. I guess somewhat mixed, but I didn't exactly get thrown out of the house.

You came out to a few close friends. After that were you out, and it was general knowledge, or was it pretty secretive?

Not necessarily. It's one of those things that I don't tell up front. If they ask me, I have no problem telling them.

Were you identified as gifted in school?

Yes I was.

When were you identified, do you know?

Very young.

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Elementary?

Yeah.

What were your programs like?

The ones in my earliest elementary school... my first kindergarten I was in a multiage classroom, so that was fine. I was just doing the work of the older kids. I switched schools a lot, so it really depended on the school.

In middle school were you mostly separate classes or general classes?

My middle school had honors classes so I was pretty much in all honors classes. They weren't really separate, but most kids didn't take a full load of them.

In high school, did you have AP?

Yes.

And you mostly took that?

Mostly AP and then honors when the AP was not offered.

Did you do any other gifted extracurricular stuff, camps or anything?

Not really, for the most part.

Did you ever feel different for being bi?

Yeah. It was one of those things where I was never really sure how to bring it up, how people would take it, any of that.

Were your friends okay with it mostly? You said they were when you came out.

Yeah. Some of them thought it was a bit weird because I guess people just assume I'm fully straight, but none of them were ever completely freaked out by it or anything.

Did you hang out with any other queer people?

I did. Actually I had one friend who found out that I was bi when she was trying to come out to me, so that was an interesting situation.

Did you ever feel different for being gifted?

Not really. I spent a lot of my life surrounded by people who were either gifted or who just didn't see it as a big deal.

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How was the general school climate as far as being bi?

My school was pretty neutral. You didn't really hear much about gay kids getting picked on, and we had a somewhat strong gay straight alliance, but it wasn't exactly decked out in rainbow flags.

So you didn't feel threatened or harassed?

No, but I was also pretty quiet about it so maybe things would have been different if I were completely out at the time.

Were you in the GSA?

No. I considered it and didn't wind up having time and my parents when I mentioned it were not thrilled at the idea of me joining so I figured I would avoid conflict for the time being.

Why would you say you were quiet about it and not super out?

At first it was because I was strongly religious and not happy about it. By the time I kind of got over that and started to accept myself it sort of seemed that the only people who needed to know were people I was interested in dating. It didn't seem like something I needed to project on the whole school or anything.

When did you become okay with it for yourself?

Probably when I was about fifteen or sixteen, but at least several months after I figured out that I was bi. It took me awhile to come to terms with it.

What sort of things did you do to try to come to terms with it?

For a while I wound up trying to get more into my religion, and then I realized that wasn't working for me so I started trying to do research, looking things up online to just figure stuff out, and I also had more time to adjust to the fact that I was still myself. I had just figured out one new aspect of my life and it wasn't that big a deal.

Did talking to friends or your family help at all?

Yeah, but talking to some of my friends and to my sister definitely helped.

Not so much to parents?

No.

How would you say you coped with feeling different from your peers?



## Interview 9: Kelley

I've really just coped by trying to be myself. It didn't seem like there was any point in trying to change myself to be more like everyone else, and I may as well like who I am.

Were you involved in any extracurriculars?

Yes. I did Tae Kwon Do and piano. Those were my official extracurriculars. I had a lot of things I set up for myself such as National Novel Writing Month.

Did any of those help you feel like yourself?

Yeah, I felt a lot more normal knowing that there were things in my life that were things that anyone could be doing, I suppose.

Were teachers supportive or unsupportive?

I didn't really talk to most of my teachers about being bisexual, and obviously they were supportive of being gifted.

You didn't feel like any were hostile or anything?

No.

You said researching online helped?

Yes.

Did you get involved in any online communities or anything?

Not really. There were a couple times when I would post a few things on forums or read forums but I never really made an effort to include myself in a tight community.

Did you feel like your social situation was better in your honors and AP classes than in gen. ed. classes?

Somewhat. I would say. I met some of my friends through my honors and AP classes and I feel like I connected with those people better than I probably would have people who weren't as motivated, but I also made friends with a lot of people who weren't in my classes.

Where or how did you make friends with them?

A lot of them went to my school but were in higher grade levels than me so we didn't really run into each other in classes but we would have the same lunch or maybe the same extracurricular.

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You don't feel like there's a difference in the perceptions toward bi or queer people in the two settings?

No, not really.

Do you feel like your gifted identity affected your bi identity, or vice versa?

I'm not sure. I feel like it may have perhaps since that's probably one of the reasons why I'm motivated to learn things about myself, so that may have helped me to come to terms with it more than had I not had the motivation to actually figure myself out. That may come back to me being gifted or it may just be a part of me otherwise.

How do you feel like things are different now that you're in college?

I feel like in some ways it's easier to be open about my sexuality. In other ways it's harder because I have to live with the people who I spend time with. Obviously being gifted, it's William and Mary, it's not so special here.

So are you out to most people here?

Not really. I'm out to a lot of the people who I'm friends with through my sister or who I've met through outside things. I'm a bit more quiet about it on my hall because I'm not really sure how they would take it and I don't want to cause drama with the people I live with.

Do you feel okay with being closeted on your hall?

It's a little bit uncomfortable sometimes because there are things that I really do wish I could do like maybe put up some sort of pride sticker or something, and I feel slightly limited in that, but I'm not entirely certain what I would do to change it right now without causing a lot of stress. Still working on that.

So it's easier to stay?

Yeah, and I doubt that I will stay this way forever because that would get very stifling, but I'm kind of moving slowly about it I suppose.

What suggestions would you have for teachers or institutionally for schools?

Probably would be a bit difficult, but make it clear that you're accepting of LGBT students, but that it's not some huge deal. Make sure that it's accepting and open and that people know not to treat them differently or torment them or anything but also make it... set up some program to remind kids that it's not their entire life. It's one aspect of who

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they are, and people have more things in common than they would think, and sexuality is just one difference out of many potential ones.

Do you have any suggestions or ideas for what that program would look like?

I'm honestly not sure apart from just educating people, encouraging them to mix with each other, and maybe encourage more straight people to go to gay straight alliances so that everyone can remind themselves that gay people, straight people, we're all people, we all should be working together.

What about ideas or strategies for teachers making it clear that they're accepting?

I suppose just really encourage the teachers to make it clear that they will not tolerate any sort of bullying in the classroom. Have sanctions for teachers who overlook those things or encourage them, and have the teachers be available to students who need to talk about any sort of bullying or other emotional problems of that sort.

Anything else you can think of?

Not that I can think of. I mean, obviously there are differences in how schools are handling things.

Interview 10: Justin

When did you graduate from high school and how old are you?

I graduated from high school in the spring of 2008.

Okay. And how old are you?

I am twenty one.

How do you identify in terms of sexual orientation and gender identity?

I identify as a gay male.

And when did you first realize that you were gay?

I first realized, or started to realize, probably about the fifth grade. Right around then is when I realized something was different.

How did you figure it out?

\*Laughs\* It's kind of funny. It's a really direct memory for me. I went to... my family and another family, we went out to dinner at an Italian restaurant. Like one of those cheesy ones with singing waiters. And the entire time through the dinner, I couldn't stop looking at our waiter. I didn't really understand why I couldn't stop looking at him but like every time he would come to the table I would just like stare at him and just like... by the end of the dinner I think because I was kept on just thinking about it and I went to bed and I said Oh shit oh shit oh shit oh shit oh shit, and then from there it just like kept happening. And from that moment was probably when I first really started to realize something was different.

Why did you feel like that?

I guess just because I guess I was... you know, it was never something that my parents ever really talked about openly. And it was definitely not something that was viewed positively in my school environment. You know. And... all of your friends and in all honesty myself at that time included, you know, saying that was gay, or calling someone a faggot was a word that came out every other day. So then to realize that that word could be used and inflicted upon me was just, like, really scary in a lot of ways. Especially since I had been living up to that point expecting to start having these feelings for women, and then realizing that that's not the way that I went, just really scared the crap out of me.

Okay. And you kept saying that's when you realized you were different. Can you elaborate on how that felt?

## Interview 10: Justin

I would say different because it was at that point that I realized that my attraction or what I thought I should be doing, in terms of who I should be attracted and what path I should be like going on, in terms of moving on and dating people and just moving in a different direction from most of my friends. And because you know, in fifth grade, starting to realize this, you know, I wasn't really at a place, and I wasn't at a place for a long time, referring to myself and identifying in any way as a gay. Or even bisexual.

When did you first come out to someone else?

First time I came out to another person was the summer before my senior year of high school.

And who did you tell?

I always tell people that the first person that I came out to was my best friend from high school but in actuality the first person that I came out to was a psychologist that I started seeing... I started seeing at the end of my junior year of high school. I had seen that same psychologist before, when I was younger, because my parents thought that I might have ADHD. And then towards the end of my junior year my parents kept noticing that I kept getting really sad and angry or have this range of emotions that were always at extremes in terms of my friend group. And thought it was related to stress and things like this and asked me if I would meet with a psychologist again, because to me at that time it seemed like a really good idea because that was the...it seemed like a very safe person to talk to, like I didn't have to worry about that person telling anyone. So I kind of used that was a way to say, yeah, I'm really just kind of... I say yeah, it's really about stress and school and my friends, but really that wasn't the issue.

And how did he react?

Fortunately, he reacted very well. You know, he helped me in a lot of ways and in all honestly it was kind of at the same time that I got to a point where I was actually ready to tell him, I was kind of working at the same time to kind of be okay with it myself. My psychologist actually has a brother who is gay. And he would talk about it and we would kind of share experiences and he told me that this is okay, that there's like nothing wrong with you, that this is not something that you need to worry about, it's not a sickness or a disease or anything. It's not something that you need to try to fix. So, having that come from someone who was a safe person that I knew wasn't going to tell anyone else and also having it come from someone who was a psychologist and a doctor really kind of pushed things in the right direction.

Good. So then after that you came out to your best friend?

Yes. Right after that I came out to um, my best friend in high school. Yeah. She was the... the next person I came out to, I guess.

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And how did she react?

She reacted very well. You know in all honestly I guess what they always tell you when like you're about to come out to someone you want to pick someone who you know is probably going to be a home run. But I knew in a lot of ways that [name] wouldn't be... her parents told her when she was like ten, she said, "You know honey, if you grow up and like girls, that's okay." And she was like "Mom, I'm not a lesbian!" And she is not a lesbian. I actually spent more time at her house than I ever did at my own. And I was really good with her parents, and I just felt really comfortable there. But even in that environment, even though that I knew that it was probably gonna be okay, even though I knew that [name] was friends with other people who were identified as gay... we went to the middle of the park in the middle of the day when no one was there and it took me three times stuttering to finally say the words. And... it went really well. She embraced me so tightly to the point where she almost picked me up and she just kept on saying over and over and over again, "I'm so happy for you, I'm so happy for you, I'm so happy." And it, those words really struck me because at that moment even though I was working towards, you know, being okay with it, happiness, like being happy for it, still wasn't something that I would really say, like I wouldn't say that this was something to be happy about still. At that point.

Why did you spend more time at her house than yours?

I spent more time at her house than mine just because ...a lot of reasons in all honestly. I honest to god had no idea what my parents reaction was gonna be before I came out to them. And I knew that I would tell them at some point, but I just kept putting it off and wasn't ready to do it, and I wasn't I guess, the main thing I guess is with [name], her family, I knew that that was probably gonna be a home run but I wasn't so sure with my own family. Especially at a point in your senior year of high school, right before you're about to leave... You have one year left at home before you're about to leave to go to college. I just didn't feel comfortable though, I never had any signs that it would be okay. And also like the nature of my high school experience was that I went to high school in Norfolk. And all of my friends lived in Norfolk. But I lived in Chesapeake, I would very frequently just not wanna be in Chesapeake because all of my friends were in Norfolk. And that's where... you know, when you're the only person who lives you know, way out there, thirty minutes away, no one wants to come to see you. You always have to go see them. So that was a lot.

So did you tell [name]'s parents that you were gay?

Yes. I can't remember if I ever directly told them but I think [name] let them know and it was just kind of assumed and it was just, something that flowed very easily.

And that was presumably before you told your parents?

Yes. Yeah. [name]'s parents knew before my parents did.

## Interview 10: Justin

And was that helpful to you? To have adults?

Yeah. It was actually. It was very helpful to have... it was very helpful to have adults that you could just kind of see who would be okay with it. It was nice to kind of have a surrogate family before I was ready to tell my own family that, that it was kind of said, this is not bad, that this is okay. This isn't something that you need to really stress out about.

And after that did you come out to more friends? Come out at school? No?

The next thing I did was I kind of, from [name] I moved on and I kind of came out to my small group of friends. And then from there I kind of got... it's kind of iffy. It's kind of hard to say how it went from there because I came out to my small friends, was open about it with them. And then at the same time I kind of started to get, in the fall, with someone who went to my high school, who was... at that time I was going into my senior year, he was going into his junior year. So that same time I kinda got involved with him and then you know, my high school was extraordinarily small. My graduating class is 78 people and you knew every single person who was in the high school level, of the people who were in the middle school levels also with it. So there was the combination of coming out to a group of people and then you know, being friendly with the other effeminate kid in your very small high school. News spreads like wildfire. And it was pretty much all anyone could talk about, 'cause people would ask and then through second-hand gossip it would become very clear that yes, [name] is like... gay. And yes, him and this, this junior are talking, and because we were really the only two out people in this high school, it was, I swear to god, all anyone could ever talk about.

How did that make you feel?

Not the best. Not the best. It was really great, like, I felt like in my high school that I had a decent number of friends and that I was friends with like, across different cliques and social groups which was nice, but at the same time to have everyone talking about it and to be the center of attention and to have people looking at you in a different way, to have people that you were like.. it was really rough in a lot of ways. After... after a point I had really started to wish that people would just stop talking about it. It got to be incredibly exhausting.

Did they stop?

No. \*laughs\*

For like a whole year?

It was pretty much, I mean it got less, to a point. But when the thing with me and the junior ended, it was like, it ended. And then every single person knew the details of why

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it had ended, like every single person knew the details of every thing that went on with any person that I've had, that happened with a particular person and... Like, it was... there were all these things that I was involved with, like my high school was really WASPy. \*laughs\* and I sailed competitively, I sailed competitively fall and spring, freshman through senior year. And the guy that I sailed with and on high school sailing you sail in the boat that's, it's called double-handed sailing, adjacent, and you sailed with one other person, two people in the boat, and me and this kid who was one of my really good friends, we sailed together every single day after school for like three hours. Like, we spent, I spent an incredible amount of time with this kid, he was one of my really good friends in high school. And then when we were going to all these different events, I would, like, spend the night at these guy's houses and we would share beds in hotels together, so then, to have that memory, of how like, incredibly familiar, I never tried anything by any means but like, to kind of have my friends on the sailing team definitely... I got like a lot of...it was definitely very hard for them. And it was hard for me, trying to reconcile those relationships afterwards. I lost a lot of friends because of it.

When did you come out to your parents?

I came out to my parents right before my senior year, so it was at the end of the summer. My father and I were going on a week-long car tour looking at colleges. And the... we went to all these different places and the last one we were going, driving I think from [college] down to Georgia. We weren't looking at any schools in Georgia but my uncle lives in Savannah and we were driving down to Savannah and we were going to spend the night with him, and just hang out with him for a bit and then on the drive back up we were going to catch the college of [college]. And then go for a tour there and then drive back up to Virginia. So on the drive down, which is from about seven or eight hours and every single time my dad and I go on a drive he corners with me something. The last time - I mean we went on that last, we went to go visit my uncle again this last year, and this time he was cornering me about, you know, jobs, and where am I gonna be when I graduate. When it was four years ago and we were making this trip before my senior year of high school, he basically said, you know, you think that you're so guarded and you have all these things and secrets that we don't know about, but your mother and I, we're not stupid, we know more about you than we think you do. And to me at that point I started breathing like a horse for about ten minutes because to me that was him signaling to me that he knew. And... I ultimately, I was gonna tell him, I just wasn't planning to do it then. It was, it was just something I was putting off, I just didn't want to do it. So after that I finally said the words. Then I was like okay. And he was like, all right. So you dating anyone? And I was just like what? I was like no, I'm not, no, not dating anyone. And it was just, just talking but he kept asking questions. He had a lot of questions and he was just like, I'm glad we could finally talk about this. You know, your mother and I have suspected for a little while now but we just... we didn't really want to say anything, it was definitely a step in the right direction. And they were like, with my father it was way easier than with my mother. It was like, you know, we still love you, this doesn't change anything, you know, just keep in mind that even though we suspected, having it actually be real and out in the open changes a lot of things and it's definitely going to take us some



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time to get used to this but we're, like, I'm happy for you. And it was like a really positive thing. My mother was a little bit different. 'Cause my dad basically told me, he was like, well you know, you're out to me. You have to tell your mother. I cannot keep this, I cannot keep this secret from her, you have to tell her. And I was like, how's she going to react? And he's like, she'll be fine, she'll be fine, just like, you really need to tell her. So, after we got back, a couple of days went by and my mother and I went for a walk and I told her. And it was a little bit, it was a little bit more difficult with her. Still not that bad. The, what I would say, it was more just the readjustment period. With her, was a little, gave me some headaches. You know, kind of like... you know, just the language, instead of referring to like, girls that I was interested in, instead of talking about guys that I was talking in, the little subtleties of things like that. Not knowing what was okay to say in front of her and what wasn't in front of her took a little bit of time to figure out. But all in all it wasn't too terrible. I know she had struggles with it but I didn't find that out until much later. And she really kept them from me.

Switching gears a little bit, were you identified as gifted in school?

Like going back to middle school I went to Catholic school so there wasn't really like multiple tracks. Very small school, we're talking probably sixty kids a grade, sixth, seventh and eighth. So, there was maybe differences in terms of math but for the most part we were all in the same classes. We were all being... we were all given a very rigorous education. In high school though that changed. Yeah, but it changed gradually from freshman year through senior year. Freshman year I had some classes with just like, you know, everyone, that everyone had to take. And then by senior year I was pretty much all in other classes. I was either in all APs or honors equivalent classes.

And was that public school?

It was in private school.

Private? Okay. But not Catholic?

Not Catholic, no. I went to Catholic school from kindergarten through eighth grade and then I switched to a private school, a private secular school, in high school.

Did you feel like you were different from your peers for being gifted?

Not in Catholic school. Not in middle school. But definitely in high school.

Why or how?

I mentioned this before, like, my high school was a private school, and it was not cheap to go there and there were a lot of people who were there because their parents had a lot of money but didn't necessarily give a shit about school. I just remember being frustrated in the classes where I remember being with them in group projects where you'd really be

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trying to put your best foot forward to get an A and do well and they would just act like they didn't give a shit or they didn't do the reading or they weren't helpful or they never had anything to say in class. The same people were always raising their hands over and over and over and it was really frustrating in a lot of ways. I'd just get ignored really easily.

And was that better in the honors and APs?

Yes. Yeah, it was. When I sort of moved, I took every advanced placement history class that my high school offered and it was way better to take classes with people who actually were like engaged and wanted to be in the class even though they didn't have to, than it was to be in a class where if you're talking you're trying to have a real conversation about something related to a book and it's like an English class and you're trying to say something insightful about something you just read and then other people would sit down shut up, or it's like, you kiss ass, all these things. Yeah. It was definitely better in AP classes.

In the regular classes and in middle school, did you feel like socially, it was negative that you were smart?

Not in middle school, but definitely more in high school. Like, there was, I had teachers, there were teachers that I had called students out on it. Like you know, there was just this jock sort of mob show and they were cults and so, they all recognized, and it seemed like the cooler you were, went hand in hand with getting really bad grades.

But did the teachers call...

They wouldn't call individual students out on this so much but they would kind of address it, and they would actually say it more in classes that, were like the AP classes. These were teachers who were like teaching both advanced placement classes as well as regular classes and they would say, you know, those of us who were in AP classes, they were just, it seems like man, they think that they're being cool by like not doing well, by like not giving about their schoolwork, basically.

Were most of your friends also in the AP classes and honors?

For the most part, yeah. Most of the people I hung out with were in some AP class, with a few exceptions, but for the most part yeah. You know, the way that my high school worked is that, if you were... it's a very small high school so if you were taking, you know, AP government, and AP statistics, that kind of locked you into taking, if you weren't another class, like, if you were taking the non-AP version of Spanish, it kind of locked you taking into the other subject with those students who weren't in APs because that's how your schedule went. So because I was taking AP government and AP statistics, even though my third bell might not have been an AP class because the other

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people were taking that class for AP and they were locked in that schedule the same people would pretty much be in that class.

So you definitely felt different for being gay once you came out. People were talking about it. How did that affect you socially, other than being talked about?

I definitely stopped hanging out with my friends from the sailing team as much. And that definitely happened. And... like I guess in terms of like socially, in terms of all of it? I just started hanging out that core group of friends more. And kind of testing the waters more with them and then not hanging out with my sailing friends more. I started, like, I used to go back and forth between sitting with my guy friends, and then like, my other friends were who predominantly girls and then I stopped sitting with my friends who were mainly guys, I guess. My high school's very segregated. There was like a guy's table, a popular girl's table, a girl's table, a nerdy girl's table, an okay girl's table. It was really weird. So I used to always just sit around with like a bunch of different people because I had a lot of different friends and I didn't care. But at that point I definitely just moved into the safe space.

So the sailing team was mostly guys, or all guys?

Pretty much, yeah.

And then your close peer group friends was mostly girls?

Yeah.

And they were okay with it?

Yeah! They were all very cool with it.

Do you feel like you felt different from your peers before you came out? In middle school and high school.

Yeah. Yeah. I used to call it being on gaywatch. Yeah, just, the things that I would say. In middle school it was more like the thoughts that I had and then in high school it was more kind of like really having to beat the shit out of the mannerisms and the thoughts that I had and the music that I was interested in and the shows that I wanted to watch. It just came off as being really effeminate. Which, I always joked that freshman year of college me and freshman year of high school me wouldn't have been friends with like freshman year of college me. We're like night and day.

So you think you definitely consciously chose to hide those parts of you?

Yup.

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Why?

'Cause I knew that if I did that then people would just talk about it more. I knew that even if I didn't come out but looked like I was gay or talked like I was gay or acted like I was gay, people would automatically assume that I was and then it would just be a waiting game before I admitted it and then they would pounce on me.

Middle school though, it wasn't... as much of a problem?

No... middle school, middle school was fortunate in the way that we had to wear uniforms up through the 8<sup>th</sup> grade. Had haircuts, were like determined, you... my interest at that time really didn't, my interests were my friends' interests, the music that I listened to was what my friends were listening to. And I was very much hanging out with like the same people that I'd hung out, like in Catholic school, I'd known these kids since I was in kindergarten. Like... you know, there's no really refiguring. But then going into high school, to a completely different high school and a completely different city where I didn't know anyone, it was really, really difficult to make friends for the first time.

Just because you were new or for other reasons?

I think mainly because I was gay. It may have been because I was new.

And did you feel like socially it was better being gay in your AP classes and your honors classes?

Yes. I would say that. Yeah, for the most part, I would say that was probably pretty true.

Any idea why? Or thoughts on that?

Well the reason was kinda because I didn't come out until I was a senior in high school.

So then everyone was...

Most of my classes were pretty, where I was taking four... so there's seven periods, I was taking four of those for APs. I was taking physics just as like an elective. No one took physics as just like an elective. You either took it 'cause you wanted to take advanced placement physics or you just didn't take it if you weren't interested in that. So I took it to kind of have a more rigorous schedule applying for colleges. And then the other, the like non... I could have taken AP Spanish 4 my senior year but I chose not to, I took regular Spanish 4 and then I definitely had issues in that class.

What sort of issues?

Like... I was very fortunate that the teacher that I had for Spanish 4 was very much in my corner in a lot of ways. She was... I had had her for Spanish 3. She was my homeroom

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teacher. I still keep in touch and she was just a really awesome person. But the kind of crap that I had to deal with was there was like this one jackass that every single time I would be called on to read in Spanish, and if I sounded more effeminate than not, he would mimic, everything that I said, like make fun of me.

But that didn't happen as much in the AP classes?

No.

So how did you cope with feeling different and with being made fun of?

In middle school, um, \*laughs\* in middle school I reverted to the age-old method of prayer. When I started to realize that I was gay I was just went into a tailspin. I used to just tell people... I didn't, I couldn't even think women, not even an option, and I was sure as hell wasn't going to be thinking about guys, so I just told everyone I was going to become a priest, like I was going to be celibate for the rest of my life and not really give any explanation to that. I just... like... I just prayed and I'm not even, I'm not exaggerating, I prayed every single night for a year to God to tell him, to ask him to turn me straight. Every single night without fail. You know. Middle school was just a hostile environment in terms of that, which it just, it was more just eating my thoughts but even more, I had a teacher in sixth grade, a history teacher who told the class that one of the reasons that the Roman empire fell was due to immorality, such as homosexuality, within Roman culture, is one of the reasons why the Roman empire fell. So hearing that from a teacher when you're already scared shitless and think that you're going to hell and in a Catholic school environment where all of your friends are saying faggot every other day, really doesn't help you to, to build that self-esteem. So I prayed. I prayed a lot. And then hoped to God that I would be turned straight

Did you keep calling people faggots and...?

Yeah. Yeah, that was another way, definitely kept up with that language. Oh yeah. You know, you call somebody else a faggot then, it's a good way to make people, kind of keep people from calling you a faggot.

So just trying to blend in.

Yeah. Yeah definitely. I was, yeah.

Did you feel like any teachers were supportive or were they all kind of awful?

I had one that I could...I didn't really know it at the time but I've actually talked to her since then, and she has been supportive and it was really weird for me to tell her, having left, you know, as a teacher who I like loved and adored. And I knew she was a very warm and loving person. I never heard her talk one way or another about it, but if I'd had to pick one teacher to come out to when I was in middle school it would've been this teacher and when I came out to her later, you know, I think, I don't even think I came out

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to her until, it might have been my senior year of high school, it might even have been college when I did come out to her, she was just very supportive and very affirming of that and me. Like, I talk to her every now and then.

What about high school?

How it was in high school? Umm... freshman year, before I came out, like I just said, it was more trying to blend in. In terms of our dress code, you had to wear a button-down shirt and a tie to school every single day. And a way to blend in was to wear the dress code but to just make it look like I didn't give a shit about it. Like, you dressed like you didn't care, so you would wear like a plaid button down shirt with a Looney Tunes tie. So you were in dress code but you didn't look, you didn't look professional like the aim of the school was, you could get away with that. So I would do that.

Was that like the thing to do? The popular thing?

Yeah. They didn't give a shit. Yeah. If you were straight than most people didn't put a lot of effort into their... I mean, some people did, 'cause their moms dressed them, but even then it was still very basic, it was like white oxfords and like a striped tie. Like still not a lot of effort. So that was one way, it was just kind of the way I dressed, and... I let my hair grow out to that mop thing that everyone did in high school, blended in that way. I hung out with like more friends who were guys a lot, never made a point to talk one way or another about being interested in someone.

No one asked?

No one really asked and I never really pursued it. I just kinda flew under the radar on that one.

And what about teachers there? You said you had the one...

Yeah. My Spanish teacher was, after I came out, she was phenomenal. I will never forget what she did for me in high school. She was my home room teacher my senior year of high school and then after it came out she would just, she could tell that it was taxing on me on a regular, on a daily basis, to be out in that environment. She saw that I got beat down in class because she had me in class, and she would tell them to stop it, cut it out, but like, that doesn't stop it from happening the first time. You can tell someone to stop it but like, you know it's there. And she was, she definitely tried and it was ...to have her in my homeroom, where she called me up one day, she called me up to the front of class and she said shh! [name]! Come up here. And she like handed me something, and it was like a wrapped present. She was like don't show anybody. I didn't get anybody else anything. So I was like what is this? And she was like, open it later! Open it later. And she shoed me away. And I did open it later and it was a book that she had gotten on the Amazon and it was, um, "Great Homosexuals in History." And she wrote this really sweet note on like the inside of the pages, that was just a really nice thing to do. And when...the first

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real relationship that I had was my senior year of high school and I kinda went, it was like going through middle school all over again, like starting over in a lot of ways, all of the things that a lot of people figured out with earlier relationships at the beginning of high school or middle school, I had just kind of figured out. I was like, wave of emotions, oh my god, this is what it's like to like someone, this is what it's like, for them to like, ah, fuck it, to not text you back or what it's like for them to be mean and to ignore you and there was one time when it ended, I just lost it, went in to crazy emotions and just started crying and then, I was exhausted in the middle of the hall, she saw me, pulled me into her room and held off the class that was supposed to come in there for ten or fifteen minutes and just let me like cry in there. She was like, I'm gonna go get, we're gonna call your mother, you're gonna go home, and she facilitated that for me. Which was really, really helpful.

Any other teachers particularly good or bad?

Not really. A lot of people in the middle. People who were neither good nor bad. There's a lot of teachers that I was really close with that I just never talked to about my sexuality at all. Like I loved most of my teachers that I had in high school, some phenomenal teachers, and we would talk about things but I... she was the only one who I really opened up to about that kind of stuff.

Did the other teachers shut people down when they were insulting you?

Fortunately I never really had to, I never really had the experience in terms of the classes, most of where I did experience this was not in class. It was outside of class. It was side comments in the hallways as I was walking back.

I'm going to take a wild guess that your school didn't have a GSA?

No. \*laughs\* God no.

What about online? Did you use the internet as a coping thing at all? Either in online communities or by looking stuff up?

Yeah. The internet definitely played a role in a lot of ways. One thing that really helped was, it's not really online but I super secretly found ways to purchase every season of Queer as Folk and I watched that pretty much from the end of junior year on and that was great. And then when I came out to my parents I could watch it at my house. But even then, even when I was out to my parents I would wait to really late at night until they had gone to bed and I would watch it after they went to sleep. Queer as Folk helped a lot.

Helped a lot how?

Just because it was like the first time that I had ever really seen...like you critique now from a college senior stand-point, you can critique the hell out of Queer as Folk. Not all

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gay men go to clubs and do drugs and have anonymous sex, but when you're like, when you're in high school and you're just grasping for any showing on television of gay life regardless of how stereotypical it is, regardless of how inflated and blown up it is, it just like was really comforting to see people that you could relate to. Like, someone falling for a guy and then having his heart crushed when that didn't work out. You know, living in a big city, having friends who were gay, the idea that you could have a group of friends and all of them were gay, that blew my mind that there could be enough homos in this world that I could actually just go out to dinner and all the people around me would be gay, to have a community, to not be the only person. With, you know, a bunch of straight girl allies, but to actually have people who were friends, who were gay, that you can talk to when you talk to them about these issues instead of just kind of nodding and saying, like, oh well, empathizing but to actually get it, to really get how bad it sucks sometimes. To have that support on television was really helpful for me in a lot of ways. Another thing that helped was in [city] there's an independent movie theater and then a rental place attached to it called the [name] and they have this entire section of, a phenomenal section of gay and lesbian movies and documentaries and things like that. So in high school I kinda started to get into it but it really became helpful, really actually became more helpful going into high school, even as I was a lot more comfortable in college. To have access to those resources, to see, to be able to tap into gay cinema and books, you know, gives you knowledge and it gives you power in a way. It gives you a home, even if its an artificial home.

Okay. No online chatrooms or communities or anything like that?

No, didn't do anything like that. No.

Did you do any extracurriculars besides sailing?

Yes! In high school, let's see. I was... I was in National Honors Society. If I recall... I was president of the Spanish club. I was president and founder of the food bank club, which was food bank of southeastern Virginia, and it was a club that basically raised awareness of the poor and did food drives for that food bank. Those were in high school, those were the three big ones.

Did you feel like those give you places to fit in at all?

Yeah. I mean, it was fortunate because Spanish club was very much a service type Spanish club. We actively did service for people. Like, in Latin American countries, and that was really cool. In others ways and I bonded with that one Spanish teacher. So that was really awesome. And, I, yeah. It allowed me to fit in in that way just because, you know, you... most of the guys who were on the sailing team really only gave a crap about sailing and then most of the assholes in high school really weren't involved in clubs, especially service clubs. Like, they couldn't imagine doing any good for anyone besides themselves. Yeah. Those were nice. I just liked to be out front, like leading something made me feel good about myself. Still does.



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Why?

I...I'm just trying to put words to it. Why it feels good to lead things. I... I can talk more about it from a college standpoint. It's that I've... always been someone who's been really ambitious. I'm always someone who likes to be involved, feel like I'm working towards something, and gaining new skills, and so in a group setting when you are leading, then you can talk to different people and kind of understand and assess different people's opinions and values and views and what they want to do more than when I go, and be able to synthesize those ideas and arbitrate between different ideas and make decisions and move people forward, and do a good job and have people tell you that you did a good job. I mean now I got the first real case of that in college when I was a sophomore and I was the youngest pledge coordinator that APO had ever had and all these people were like, oh, you're not going to do it well, and then at the end of it I had so many people come up to me, like so many pledges, people, brothers and say that was one of the best-run pledging semesters we've ever seen. And to have people tell you that, and give you that compliment, it gives you that satisfaction that you can move on and do better things, it really helps your confidence. Like it makes you want to do more things and it gives you confidence and you can do them well.

Any other coping strategies you can think of, positive or negative?

Trying to think. Stopped going to church.

Why did you decide to do that?

As I really started to figure out my sexuality, I just... I just did not really feel. I was just really skeptical about being out and I was skeptical about being out and at my parents' church and at the same time I just never really felt that much of a connection to it and that's...as I started to identify as being gay and it just, the degree to which I felt comfortable, the degree to which I felt that I could talk to those people that I had met there and actually form real friendships and let them see all of me, it just became more and more clear that I didn't really feel like I could do that. I just, looking back on it I realized that the thing was that it wasn't, I didn't move away from my parents, I realized that the real reason why I moved away from my parents church was that I'm not all that wild about Christianity. But at the time it was kinda combined with the fact that I didn't really feel comfortable being out in that setting. So, I convinced my parents that because I was sailing every day, I was sailing every day after school, and because I had regattas every single morning from like 8 o'clock in the morning until 9 because I was driving and I had to get up extra early to go there and I was involved in all these clubs and all these things that I just told my parents, I was like Mom, Dad, I need just one day out of the week where I can sleep in. I need just one day out of the week where I can just crash and if I have to get up and go to worship on Sunday morning on top of all these things I just, literally, just give me one day where I can sleep in until noon. And then that finally convinced them to say okay, you don't have to go church if you don't want to. You're a

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senior in high school, you can make this decision for yourself. You don't have to go. And then they would of course try and guilt me, like, oh, your friends at church asked where you are and all your friends at church wanna know where you've been. I'd be like, mmm, send them a postcard. Like, I didn't really feel like that close with those friends, so I wasn't mourning the loss by any means. I was so thankful to not have to go.

Okay. Anything else? Positive or negative?

Positive or negative. There was one story that I left out. The kid who gave me crap in Spanish class. I was... it just kept happening over and over again and then one time after I was particularly upset, the teacher told me to stay after and we talked about it a lot, and she told me a little story. She said, you know, you gotta... like, do you wanna keep letting him be an asshole to you or do you wanna win? And I was like what the heck... what do you mean, do you wanna win? I didn't really get it. And she was like, look [name]. When I was in pastry school...she got her undergrad in the University of Virginia in I guess Hispanic Studies, and then went to pastry school and then ran a pastry, a bakery for a long time and then decided to go back to teaching. So when I was in pastry school, all the people who were in pastry school were guys. There was this one really fat, sorry, guy who used to always talk and say all these sexually lewd things about me when I wasn't there, that were just plain untrue. And I remember one time I was walking into the kitchen and he started saying all these things and then I just like, I turned it on him and I took it to a really kinky place and was like 'Yeah you know I like it rough, you know I like all the kinky shit and the harnesses and all that stuff.' And his face just got so red and he was so embarrassed in front of all his friends that he just stopped talking about it altogether. And I can, he like, never had to deal with it. She looked at me and she said, so, do you... you wanna let him continue be an asshole or do you wanna win? And I was like, ah, I wanna win. So, towards the end of my senior year, at that point the kid settled down a bit but the next time that it happened, we had got, kinda talked about it, and after I sat down, he started making fun of me, I slammed my book shut, and I looked him directly in the eyes, and I said, we'll call him John. 'John! Stop undressing me with your eyes. Everyone will know about us.' And then the entire class erupted in laughter and his face got so red, he was just so embarrassed and then, the teacher had to excuse herself, she was laughing so hard. And then I never really had any issues with it from then on. So I dunno if I would advise people to do that, cause that can go really wrong, but that was one thing that happened, that was kind of like, it was really cool in that moment to kind of tell the bully to shut the hell up, but, it was just kind of like a latent victory. In a lot of ways.

Do you feel like your gifted identity and your gay identity interacted at all?

That's a good question; it's difficult to say. I would say that my gifted identity led me to, you know, seek out colleges where I knew that I would probably have a greater chance of being accepted. It would be funny, yeah. I think one of the ways that I actually kind of asserted myself was through all the...the kind of gay people that I knew at that point were very motivated, very intelligent people, people who wanted to move on and do things like

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with their selves. The gay people I knew were not like stupid, they were not the people who didn't give a crap in school, they were the people who actually would do well in school. At least the ones that I knew. So they kind of, like, being gay made me kinda, in some way kind of maybe think that I was like destined for something better. It made me think that I was destined to be ambitious. And that by being ambitious, I could get to a place eventually where being gay wouldn't be seen as, or, like, wouldn't, I could get to a place that wasn't a hell that was my high school.

And how have things changed now that you're in college?

Oh, things have changed a lot since I've been in college. I mean, it's, like, in the same room where had that focus group thing you heard, very different... very different opinions about how affirming they think this place is, and, I have to say that overwhelmingly I feel, I mean, maybe it's just compared to my high school experience but I felt way more accepted here than I did in high school. Not to say that William and Mary is perfect but I did feel way more accepted here. For example, I've walked into college not having to, you know, alter an identity, like I came in to college being able to say I'm gay, this is me, this is who I am. And my freshman hall, all guys, you know, half of them are in one fraternity right now and they're all Greek and all these things, very fratty hall, but we all got along really well. I'm still friends with these people now, one of my...my roommate from this past year and this year is a friend that I met on that hall and he's straight. Like, I've met friends and made more friends who were gay here, I was able to actually start dating and have more people to date when I was here. Whereas anyone who's gay at William and Mary can tell you, this is not the gay mecca that you would think it is but it was still better than my high school. Yeah, there were... sexual orientation was included in the non-discrimination policy and there were LGBT organizations that I could join. There were classes that I could take, there was like, an ethic that it would be okay to be here. I had no difficulty making friends whatsoever because of my sexual orientation. It was just... it was a lot better in a lot of ways. So I... what I was surprised to find that when I got here, it was just, the overwhelming number of people who just, just were closeted. Like, that were just still very, still like trying to figure it out, still like came here, and that was just frustrating in a lot of ways. Yeah. That was frustrating in a lot of ways.

Why?

Just cause I came through high school at the end of it feeling really good about myself and feeling really okay about myself and there's just this, it just really frustrated me to see all of these people who were, you know, at least to my drawn stereotypes, looked to me to be very, very apparent to be someone who is gay, or who will likely be, will come out at some point and have them still be very closeted and just, smack my head up against the wall, and say, if ever there was a case where you could come out and be okay, this would be it. Like, you really, just like, it would just annoy me and anger me so much that I felt that this is really not some place that you need to be afraid to expose that part of yourself. Especially amongst, where I would be friends with someone that I had thought

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to be closeted and they would see these same friends interacting with me and seeing it not be a problem, but yet they didn't feel that could do the same thing and I recognize that that's an individual thing and we all come from different backgrounds, experiences and it's a struggle and a fight for us uniquely, for all of us, but at the same time it still just kind of irked me. Another thing that kind of irked me is that when I got here, very much seems as though there were sort of, at least amongst the gay men, that there were cliques. Like there were cliques around, as a freshman it was the gay mafia. Like that was a thing. There was, uh, APO gays, there was the business school gays, there was the crew team it was this whole big thing of just sexual weirdness. And there is just all these like cliques and groups and identities and you know, trying to fit into that and figure out where you should be and then, you know, wondering whether or not you should rush a fraternity or not or which one would be okay for you to rush where it was like oh, that's the gay frat, and what that means and, it was weird in a lot of ways.

So, back to high school. Would you say it was harmful you to have hidden that part of yourself for so long? What effect would you say it had on you?

I guess it's a really difficult question to answer. I think, you know, I used to always joke, I had one friend who was pretty much just like born out of the closet, you know? Those people who just...they never really were in the closet because it's just so overwhelmingly apparent that they were, that they were cool with it and that it happened and that they were just like gay from middle school on. And that wasn't my experience. When I realized that I'd...very sincere efforts to hide that. So on one hand I could see the benefit of just being okay with it earlier. It means you've been accepting of it for that much longer in your life, you've had that much more time to kind of reason through it and see it as a positive thing. But on the other hand I can also kind of see it as being like, you know, in a place like middle school or high school that isn't necessarily the best place to be out. It makes you a target for a longer period of time as well. But in all honesty, if I had to be real, I don't know. I almost, based on my own experience of being in the closet I almost wished that I had been a target for longer. I wish, I kind of wished that I had been out earlier because, you know, my overwhelming prejudice, like the prejudice that I encountered for being gay, the overwhelming amount of it was my own prejudices. I was just so angry, I was just so disgusted with myself. When I realized, when I started to figure out who I was, and I just, I literally built a wall between myself and everyone around me. I wouldn't let anyone in because keeping this secret solely to myself meant that I had control over it and it meant that no one else could get in. And that I didn't have to deal with talking about this with anyone else or I didn't have to deal with anyone else. Like I could just control it and manipulate it to myself, and then when you keep something like that in for so long, I meant we're talking like fifth grade all the way up through like my junior year of high school, through the end of it, and you... having these thoughts just banging around in your head constantly, over and over and over again, when I came out, yeah, I came out but that wall was still there in a lot of ways. Like before I came out, the littlest shit would set me off. Any time my mother came into my room, or she, you know, saw the queer as folk series, like, oh, what's this? What are you watching? If she caught me watching or was about to, or like came home early when I

## Interview 10: Justin

was watching a movie that was gay, or when she noticed I had an issue of Out magazine on my bed, like, I used to keep my door locked at all times. I used to hide those things and my parents were starting to figure out, to pry into it more and more and more, and the more that they pried, the more that I got angry, the more that I told them, to like fuck off and leave me alone. And yeah, I came out but, in a lot of ways it was a, it was a long process after that before I was really okay with starting to love my family in a lot of ways. It was a long time before little things would stop pissing me off as much as they did. You know it took, I like to say that I've taken down most of that wall but at the same time when you do that, it, it's a really hard thing to do. I was just so angry. Like, really, just the littlest things. \*sighs\* And then right after I came out and then, the first person that I talked to, and... I could tell her all of these things, I could say, um, which basketball players I thought were hot... and it was like full-on gates opened and I'm sure she was like a little excited with the first hour and by the end of it she was like 'oh my god would you shut the hell up.' And I just couldn't talk, I couldn't stop talking about it, I couldn't stop talking about it and because I couldn't stop talking about it, especially when I was coming out first, I just, I didn't know because then I didn't know what was taboo to say and what wasn't taboo to say. I didn't know what was okay to say in front of your mother and what's okay to say in front of like, your best friend. Traversing those waters as they're kind of figuring out and being accepting of who you are was kind of... was a little rocky at times. I think, yeah, I think that it probably would have been better if I had come out earlier in a lot of ways because there was just times in my closeted-ness where I was just... so angry, or so sad, and I couldn't do anything about it. Like, I... like, very, very low, low, to the point where it was scary. And I remember, when I came out, one of the most astonishing things to me was that I, I... I was actually happy. Like after I came out. Not right when I came out but as time, I actually was happy. I was genuinely happy. I had an optimistic attitude most of the time. Like, I felt good about things, I had a positive perspective. It's just really been, it didn't exist when I was in the closet. Happiness was the best part about coming out. And then knowing what it was like to actually be happy. Even if I got picked on, like, middle school, even if I got like slammed into the lockers and shit like that, at least part of the time I would have been happy.

Okay. Well, on a slightly more uplifting note, last question. Obviously the goal of this research would be to make things better for middle schoolers and high schoolers by giving teachers suggestions and tools. So what suggestions would you have for teachers and for schools institutionally?

My suggestion would be to let, first off, if anyone in a class and you see it and not even, if it's not in a class and it's in a hallway, if anyone says anything that's even remotely derogatory towards a queer student, you strike that down immediately. You say that that is not okay, you make it incredibly clear that that is not language or behavior that is acceptable. Also you allow, I would say, you would allow LGBT kids to interact with other LGBT kids, and you have examples, like, in school, of teachers and administrators who were LGBT, who have partners and who have lives and are real enough, close and you look and see that it's possible to kind of, to grow up and meet someone that it's possible to get past that middle school angst. You know.

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Do you have specific suggestions for how to allow kids to interact with other LGBT kids?

In middle school its difficult, you know? I don't know if the GSA has ever broken into middle school grounds. It's difficult. I don't know. I know that even in, that I would get friends teaching at an inner city school, right now, and even they have, like a GSA, and so I think things like that...I also know, you provide resources, whatever resources you can to those kids. I know in Richmond they have Rosmy, the Richmond Organization for Sexual Minorities Youth. If those resources aren't at the school, you do your best to connect them to those resources as is possible. And if there is an organization great, that's awesome. You know, you're really, genuinely, like worried about a kid and you don't want to overstep your bounds. I don't know, I guess you do your best to direct them to the resources they can, the Trevor Project, or GLSEN. I guess you just do the best that you can to direct them to the resources of what they have, you know, if their parents are probably not going to be okay with it or you think that they're going to run into opposition at home I'd say tell them to go to the internet. Do it virtually. You know. Watch a few It Gets Better videos, find a website, or maybe even a chatroom so that...showing you know, I would say chatroom could get sketchy, but you know, find the It Gets Better project, watch a few videos. See people who are older than you, watch it under the covers of your bed. I think that is really helpful for a lot of people. All the thirty year old men who told me it was helpful.

Anything else you'd like to add about anything?

Nothing I can think of.

Okay. Any questions for me?

No. I don't have any questions, I've spilled my feelings all over the floor.

Interview 11: Walter

When did you graduate from high school and how old are you?

2007; 22

How do you identify in terms of sexual orientation and gender identity?

A homosexual male.

And when did you first realize that you were homosexual?

When I was 12.

And how did that go?

Very badly. It had nothing to do with my family or friends...It was just I felt there was a huge stigma of it. It didn't tell anyone until I was 16.

How did you realize it?

Internet...I typed in the wrong name for a site and it came up with as a site that I probably shouldn't have been viewing when I was 12, and it clicked things into place.

And you first told someone at 16?

Yeah, my brother found out before I was 16, but I never actually admitted it to him. And the first person I actually told was my aunt and her partner.

And how did that go?

It went OK. They gave me advice, telling me that I should probably talk to my parents because they were OK with them and they're lesbians and stuff like that...but to take my time and one of them actually wanted to make sure that maybe I was just attracted to strong women and stuff like that. And I told her that I was quite sure that I was not attracted to women in anyway, shape, or form at the time. So, I mean, they were just trying to make sure that it wasn't just like a phase or something like that. They didn't want me to get myself too serious into it and possibly get myself hurt.

And so did you tell your parents after that?

I told my dad about a month later, and I told my mom about two months after my dad.

And how did that go?

My dad, just because I was going to a Catholic school at that time, my dad just said make sure that you don't like spread around...just take some time and then make sure it's not

## Interview 11: Walter

some phase or anything...my mom was really silent after the conversation, and my dad told me later that she actually kinda broke down crying to him later on because she thought it was her fault, because her side of the family...because it runs on her side of the family. And it was her fault that it made my life harder or something.

And how did all that make you feel?

Comparatively, I felt a lot better as I told people...I'd been sort of like keeping it inside, and hadn't really told anyone. My brother knew, but I never actually mentioned it to him, because in his own strange way he was trying to keep me safe by just making sure I understood stuff...but I didn't appreciate it at the time. But, yeah, it just made me feel really relaxed to know that people knew and they weren't going to kick me out or anything like that, that they still loved me. Both of them, at the time, said that they still loved me, which was really important.

So what did your brother do before you officially told him?

He just kinda teased me about it...and he also, from time to time, would just make comments like suggestions or stuff like that. Looking back on it now I see that it was just his way... that he really didn't know how to deal with it and he was just trying to help me deal with it in his own way. But at the time I kinda felt harassed by it, primarily because I never. . . we never actually talked about it...and I'm sure that if we did...but yeah he's only a year older than me so I'm pretty sure he felt as weird about it as I did at the time.

When did you come out to friends?

Actually it wasn't until my senior year of high school, when I was 17. I told one or two friends over the internet. Actually I was pretty open on the internet, but the ones in real life I didn't tell until ...well what happened was I was gaining confidence and one of my friends was always making friendly jokes, I guess, about stuff like sexuality and stuff. And then I finally said well ya, I am gay, and she kinda was really surprised about that. And my other friends' responses varied from: "Why didn't you tell us sooner?" to "I called it freshman year."

They were all supportive?

Yeah, I was surprised, I mean I didn't have a large amount of friends back then, and I chose my friends very carefully, so I mean, I'm not now surprised thinking back on it, but back then I kinda had the fear of being rejected, especially by one of my closest friends who is really Catholic. But she actually has been the most...she's tried the hardest to get to know me and to like talk about boyfriends and stuff like that, even though I know that it doesn't make her feel super comfortable, but she tries her hardest which I really appreciate.



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Can you elaborate on how you chose your friends carefully, because that was before you came out, right?

I was very, very shy. I didn't really get along with most other guys, because a lot of other guys were doing the entire macho thing, and were into sports and stuff like that and while I wasn't into things that you'd normally associate with like gay guys, I still was more very nerdy and that was just very...I didn't want to get teased, and I wasn't OK with other people...and I was just always nervous around other people. So I wanted to choose people who had similar interests who I felt comfortable around, and that just took me a long time because I actually didn't really talk to people that first year of high school.

Switching gears a little bit, were you formally identified as gifted?

Yes.

And when and how?

In middle school we had a gifted program that was very short-lived, but I was placed in that.

What do you mean it was short-lived?

It was a private school, and the private school went under, and also the gifted program was just a trial thing for a year. It never actually got off the ground.

Was that a Catholic school too, or secular private?

Yes, it was secular private.

Okay, and what happened after it went under?

Just normal classes...the whole school didn't shut down...

Just the gifted program?

Yeah, just the gifted program, and then the school closed down a few years later, but I was gone by then.

When you were in the gifted program, did you have separate classes?

What happened was...we took some of the same classes as other people, but then during certain classes we went to a different classroom with other people from like different classes and we all worked on different things together.

Like what?

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Well, it depended...we didn't take math with the same people, we were taking high school level math courses. And that was all three grades just put together because it was still middle school. Science and history and all that were still together but it was basically math and a bit of English.

And what about in high school...was there a gifted program?

Nope.

And that was Catholic school, right? Was it an academically elite school, or no?

It was...(school) was more sports oriented. (other school) was the more academically oriented one. I just went to the school because my brother was there and I wanted to make the trip easier on my mom. It was still hard, but it was not academically focused. Its SAT scores were much lower than (other school)'s.

Did you feel different being gifted, or being smart?

Yeah, I always felt kinda like people would tease you for it. When you're in gifted and stuff like that, I always felt like the other people in gifted were always more mentally and emotionally mature. I mean it wasn't a huge amount, like, oh my God, they act like 18 year olds, but the difference between and seven year-old and a nine year-old mentally is a lot different, and stuff like that. And a twelve year-old and a fourteen year-old there's a big difference, and people can tell that...I also feel that people in gifted are almost sheltered, that they don't interact with other people a lot, and it kinda makes it harder for them to sort of interact. At least for me, my problem was that I thought a lot more...I thought a lot more about what other people were doing and stuff like that, and I kind misinterpreted them. I thought other people thought just as much as I did and made the same connections I was making.

So when you said they were more mature...more mature than you or more mature than the regular ed?

Regular ed.

So did you like your separate gifted classes better in middle school?

I liked the classes better, yeah, and I liked the people in it better too. So, yeah, I generally enjoyed them better.

Why do you think that is?

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Not to like knock on the general education kids, but it was sort of people on your own level. It's not that they were dumb or anything, it's just that they were in a different grade even if they were the same age.

Okay, and did you feel different for being gay?

Uh-huh, yeah, I felt like it was something I could never talk about.

Why?

Just I heard a lot of horror stories and I read a lot of stuff on the internet where people ...bad things happened and being gay wasn't natural and stuff like that. I guess for me I was just worried that the worst might happen. I mean logically it didn't make sense, but I was just worried that even if the chance that the worse thing could happen was really low, it was still there.

Do you feel like people in school treated you differently both before and after you came out?

I was different, but not because I was gay. I was just weird as a kid...I was just different as a child. But I mean the biggest thing was like whenever guys would be talking about like girls or stuff like that...I remember one time in elementary school I was part of Boy Scouts and they had a wrestling magazine and they were looking at all the hot girls in the wrestling magazine and I was looking at the guys in the wrestling magazine but I couldn't say anything...and it was just kinda like they were able to freely say that and be part of the group, but if I had said anything I would have been ostracized.

So did you feel like you had to hide?

Yeah, pretty much. In Boy Scouts, definitely. And all throughout high school too. I mean, it was less in middle school because they're going through puberty and they're being boys and stuff like that, but more in high school when they are actually talking about it seriously and you really can't join in those conversations because, well, you'd like to but they don't really want to hear.

Why do you think you took so long to come out?

I guess I thought if I waited long enough it would go away. Like at one point in middle school I tried very hard to...it was a horrible thing now to think about...but I tried very hard to get a girlfriend. Because like that will make me normal. Because I obviously should like this girl because she's smart and she's pretty, and I didn't realize that I could have just been friends with her. And, I mean, I felt different anyway, and also on top of that, I've been pretty much had someone say I should have been diagnosed as clinically depressed at fourteen. So I think it was just a lot of different factors that I didn't feel

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comfortable telling anyone, because I didn't feel comfortable thinking about myself as it. I think I had to actually identify myself before I could tell other people.

When would you say you became comfortable with yourself enough to...

Definitely at sixteen. Once I became comfortable at sixteen then I took the first step of talking to my aunt, then slowly extended to other people. But I did not wait long after I became comfortable enough. At about sixteen I realized the major issue I had was between religion and my sexuality because I was in a Catholic school. At sixteen I realized that if I'm in a religion that hates me for what I am, I had to rectify the fact that I can't both be Catholic and homosexual, so I kind of came to the realization that I had to choose one over the other. And the only one that I actually felt like was a choice was being Catholic, so I chose to drop that part of me.

You still went to Catholic school though, right? So how was that?

I just didn't go to confession anymore and stuff like that...I just stopped doing the extra stuff that we were asked to do but not forced to do. I still participated in the masses; I was a bit more like skeptical about stuff, but I realized later that I felt as uncomfortable before I rejected it as I did afterwards, but it was less of something actually changing and more of me realizing that I didn't belong in the first place.

You said people didn't treat you differently because you were gay, they did for other reasons...what about after you came out?

I mean some of my friends asked the usual questions because they're learning a part about you that they didn't know before, but my friends still treated me the same. The one person who kept making the joke... the jokes kept coming, they just had a different flavor to them. That was just her way of expressing affection. And honestly, no one treated me any differently except possibly asking me how it made me feel or stuff like that...they were more curious about it than repelled by it, I guess.

What about people who weren't your friends?

They didn't know...I was open to my friends; I was not open to the public. I didn't feel the need to tell people. If they weren't my friends they had no reason to know that I was heterosexual versus homosexual. It really shouldn't matter to them. I was also worried that if I came out publicly, I might possibly have to have an appointment with a priest or something like that. Because there had been other openly homosexual kids in the school, but they kind of left early. I'm not sure whether they felt uncomfortable or not, or whether it was my worst fear that the priest asked them to leave. I can understand the priest doesn't have the power in the school, but he certainly has quite a bit of clout.

How did you cope with feeling different from other people? What strategies did you use?

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After middle school, I completely isolated myself for an entire year. That didn't work very well.

Why did you think that would work? What were you trying to accomplish?

I figured if I didn't let people in, they couldn't hurt me. And I had a huge fear of being hurt...I figured if I don't make friends I can't lose friends because of something I can't control.

Did you think that fear was tied to being gay or just in general?

I think it was tied to a lot of things...being gay was definitely a part of it. Like in middle school I just didn't talk about it...I had like two friends at the time because it was a small middle school, so that was my way of coping... I just didn't interact with the general public. In high school, after I kind of got over the entire recluse thing, I pretty much didn't say what was on my mind...I chose my words very carefully and I was very quiet.

And how did that affect your social interactions and how you felt about yourself?

It didn't help me feel less different. It just made me feel like I was hiding a part of myself. My friends could tell...they tell me nowadays that I am so much more open and that they wished I had been this way in high school. And that they could tell I had something on my mind.

What about after you came out...did you do anything still to try and deal other than not coming out to the whole school?

I guess it was more... it was slowly learning what I could get away with and what I couldn't, like just with people. I always had those things that were tying me down from before, and I was just learning which of those things I could throw off. It was a very slow process of figuring out which of them were founded and which weren't. And in the end, it turned out they were all unfounded, but at the time I was just sort of treading the shallow parts of the water.

There was no GSA, right?

No...no!

I didn't think so...did you find that teachers were supportive? Not specifically with being gay, but just in general?

The only supportive teachers I met were the teachers in the science department, specifically the biology and chemistry teacher and the art teacher. Probably because I was most comfortable around them. The religion teachers I wouldn't have talked to them at all about it, and the government teachers I never really interacted with. Surprisingly, the one

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teacher I did talk with openly about these kind of things was a math teacher. She was possibly one of the most supportive teachers I've ever met in my entire life. She was always very much like I will talk to all of you and stuff like that. She was very religious, but it was not the judgmental type of religion. It was the entire loving type of religion, where all people deserve love and all people are capable of giving and receiving love, and all people should give and receive love. And I just found that entire compassion behind that enough of a motivation to actually talk to her about stuff.

So she made it very clear by what she said and did that she was very open?

I don't think she felt completely comfortable about the stuff, but at no point did she tell anyone, and at no point did she stop wanting to talk to me. She knew that I wanted someone to talk to, and she was willing to be someone that I talked to whether or not she was comfortable about it.

And was that all senior year that you talked to her?

Actually that was my junior year.

Your parents knew by then?

Yes, my parents knew by then, but that was before I told my friends.

What about the bio, chem and art teachers?

They never knew. I felt comfortable about them, but I felt like it was my own burden and I didn't want to burden them with it, especially since it was a Catholic school. I didn't feel that them holding a secret like that was good.

Did you feel that any of them were particularly hostile? To gay people in general or to you specifically?

Two of the religion teachers...it was less hostility, more the entire it's wrong thing...if it's something your going through you should talk to the priest to learn about controlling your urges, and that scared the crap out of me. Every single time I felt confidence, it wasn't until I actually stopped taking classes with them that I felt I was able to keep the confidence instead of it sort of being shattered.

So you didn't have to take classes with them all four years?

No, we switched religion teachers every year, thankfully. If we were lucky...sometimes you got the same teacher twice...I just wasn't one of them.

So, were the later ones better because you were more confident?

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I just stopped listening to them, honestly. I listened to the material for the tests, but I stopped seeing adult authority figures as being all-omniscient and all-knowing what they were doing, and realized that some were just as...that everybody has different opinions and stuff like that.

Did you do any extra-curriculars?

I did track, chess club and, let's see, Boy Scouts...oh God! That was...I think those were the major ones.

Why the Boy Scouts...Oh God!?

I feel like Boy Scouts very much reaffirms the traditional idea of masculinity, and anyone who doesn't fall into that category kind of you either adapt or you just drown...sink or swim.

What did you do?

I left Boy Scouts at sixteen. I just couldn't deal with it anymore...I stopped going to meetings. I was a Life Scout, which is the one just before Eagle, and I just didn't finish Eagle because I just didn't want to deal with it anymore.

Particularly because of the sexuality stuff?

I was realizing more and more their views on sexuality as I got older, but it was primarily just because I couldn't deal with the guys in the troop.

Because?

I just felt different, and they were kind of annoying...no, they were really annoying. And a lot of times, especially some of the younger kids in the troop were just outright belligerent in how they were talking.

In what ways?

They were just always making fun of everyone. If they weren't in their little group, they were pretty much making fun of you constantly. I just had enough of it, and I didn't want to deal with it, especially when in Boy Scouts you're put in leadership positions above them and I didn't want to have to control them.

What about track and chess club? How do you feel those affected you socially and emotionally?

I had friends there...it was more things I was interested in. I never really got to know the people in them...my friends were never in those clubs. Like I had a friend or two who

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were in that club, but I never went out of my way to find...oh, these are the people that I want to be close friends with. It was just something I was interested in...also, anime club...there we go. I forgot about that one.

Same deal there?

A few of my friends from my other group were in that group, and I went to a convention or two, but it was never: Oh I love these people and I want to be around them! It was more like just an activity I was interested in.

Did you use the internet at all in your quest to cope?

Yup.

Could you elaborate?

I looked up a lot of stuff on the internet, like just reference materials, but also I went onto a lot of forums, even if they weren't related to being gay. I just made friends there, because I felt like they're people you could make friends with but who can't actually hurt you. I realize now that they can, but when you have sort of the mask over you, you can be someone else. You don't have to worry about them judging you for it, because to them you're that person. So that was nice. Even up until now, until college, people have always noticed that the way that I act on the internet is different than how I act in real life. It's kind of like all the different inhibitions that I had put on myself in the real world I was able to shed on the internet.

And why do you think all the inhibitions in the real world are there or were there?

Why there were inhibitions in the real world or why they were gone?

Why they were in the real world.

Again it was a coping mechanism. This was how I dealt with people. Like I talked about before, these were things I made so I wouldn't get hurt by people, and stuff like that. It was my way of distancing myself. I didn't have to do that with the people online because they would never know the real you, so they could never call you on it.

You said they weren't all gay...were some of them gay...the forums?

Yeah, like one or two were forums on sexuality like that...one of them was linked to a web comic.

Which one?



## Interview 11: Walter

Khaos...it's a web comic that primarily focuses on characters who are LGBTQ. So the forums were definitely very pro LGBTQ and stuff like that. And lots of people were getting advice and just sharing their stories and stuff like that which was really nice.

Do you feel that helped you in the real world? Do you feel like anything transferred?

Yeah, I feel like a lot of times I was able to read peoples' stories and sort of understand a similar viewpoint, and apply it to my own; just a better world view of things, and that I wasn't alone and that other people were going through them as well.

Anything else you used to cope, positive or negative?

I feel like coming out to people I knew before I knew I was actually gay (like one of my close friends in elementary school, I came out to him just before I came to college) and I feel like his not treating me any differently helped a lot, reaffirming the idea that people don't treat you differently if they actually care about you. It's just another part of you; it's not something...that you're not a completely different person, if you're gay or straight. You're still the same dweeb that he played Yu-Gi-Oh cards with.

And how did things change when you went to college? Or did they?

They did. Again, it was still a slow transition of finding out who I was, because I feel like I was always hiding. Trying to sort of adapt to whatever situation versus standing out, because I was really shy. So I was just sort of figuring out who I was and people who share common interests and stuff like that, and making friends and stuff like that. This last year has been me being very happy with where I am, because I've been making my own friends, not just through LGBTQ and Lambda, but going out and making my own friends outside of my identity as gay. Most of them are LGBTQ but the original reason we met up was not because of that.

And why does that make you happy?

It kind of makes me feel a bit more normal because straight people don't have to go to straight clubs to make friends; they don't have to make friends just because they're straight and stuff like that. So it just kind of makes me feel a little bit more normal that I can have friends through common interests, not common sexuality, or the fact that we're commonly, I guess, in a similar situation that's bad. I feel like a lot of clubs where you're supposed to be giving support and stuff like that are useful; at the same time you're making friends with people because of a shared negative situation versus like shared interests.

Do you feel like your gifted identity has interacted with your gay identity at all?

Just in general, the gifted identity started the severe self-hate and just issues that I had with myself, and the gay identity just added onto it.

Interview 11: Walter

How did your gifted identity start that?

Again just feeling different than everyone else.

Anything else?

Not particularly...just the entire fact that I wasn't interested in a lot of the things that other people were interested in.

Do you think that has to do with both gifted and gay?

Yeah.

My last question...hopefully the goal of this is to give teachers suggestions and resources to make things better...so what suggestions do you have for teachers or for schools institutionally?

GSAs are a good thing. I know I spoke kind of negatively about them, but they are a good thing. I mean once you're able to go past the point where you don't just need it for your friend group, that's amazing, but GSAs are a really, really positive experience. Teachers should not sugar-coat stuff. I know it primarily has to do with an earlier age, but when a teacher goes up and rants about, say, gay people being bad or how gay marriage is a horrible thing, they are pretty much reaffirming it's a bad thing and every kid there who looks up to them as a role model will feel like they're doing something wrong and they can't communicate it. And, I mean, on the same note, I guess, positively affirming it is perfectly fine. You're not making anyone feel bad about themselves if you're positively affirming gay people. You're not making Christians or people who are homophobes feel like they're less of a person by affirming gay people. I guess just being open that you're willing to listen, and actually being open, and even if you don't agree with it, just listening to their problems. And if you can't, having some other resource like a counselor in school, and knowing where the counselor is and being willing to suggest to kids that. I feel like a lot of times that kids feel like they can't say what's really on their mind, and if they could, if they have an issue like bullying, being willing to bring it up. I got bullied a bit in PE class in high school. One of the things they did, I was very shy, they threw a condom at me and that made me feel really grossed out because at the time I really wasn't OK with the idea of sex much less STD prevention. They knew perfectly well it would upset me. They did it because they wanted to upset me. The teacher saw that and told them if they did it again then they would be suspended or expelled. So actually standing up to bullying and not just letting it happen...because they can get away with it, they do it. Other than that, just...I went to Catholic school so its kind of different because they have to uphold Catholic values, so I can understand them talking about how homosexuality is wrong and stuff like that, but at the same time having a help-network for LGBTQ identified people, even if not to say that it is right, to at least give them someone to talk to versus always feeling wrong and never having anyone to talk to...when I went to get

## Interview 11: Walter

spiritual help from the priest when I was still a practicing Catholic, even if it wasn't amazing, it was still nice that someone was caring.

Interview 12: Monica

When did you graduate from high school and how old are you?

2009, 20

How do you identify in terms of sexual orientation and gender identity?

I identify as female with regards to gender and sexuality-wise I identify as pan-curious.

And when did you first realize that you were I guess not straight necessarily?

Well, I know when I was a little girl I thought it was kind of weird that I noticed girls in a different way. I guess I never realized or put a label on what I was thinking and how I was feeling until freshman year in high school.

And how did you feel about it?

I thought it was kind of weird, but I was kind of happy about it because I thought it was kind of cool. But at the same time I hadn't come out to my mom yet, and she knows everything about me, so I was pretty anxious about that. So it was kind of a bittersweet moment.

So when did you first come out to anyone?

I came out to my mom first; we were in a car. I guess we were talking about what I wanted to do in college, and some of the experiences I wanted to have, and I kind of mentioned that I kind of wanted to be with a woman or do something with that and she looked at me like: "Oh my goodness!" and then I said that I think I'm interested in girls...I'm still interested in guys, but I like girls too...and then that's when she came out to me, cuz she said that in college she was really interested in girls too. So we both came out at that time.

Okay, so when was that?

It was the same year so when I was 14.

So did you come out to other people?

Well, later that night I told my dad too...I was in front of my mom so we kind of talked. And then after that, not until sophomore year when I met my best friend who was also sort of queer, but later on he identified as gay. But throughout high school I just came out to people I could trust like my best friend.

So it was never really common knowledge around the school or anything?

No.

## Interview 12: Monica

Switching gears a little bit...were you identified as gifted in school?

In elementary school I took the gifted test and I almost passed, so I still considered myself gifted, but in middle school it was a magnet program and in high school I was in the international baccalaureate world school program. So yeah, I considered myself gifted.

Did you feel you were different from your peers for being queer?

Yeah, I felt it was something I always had to hide...with my friends it was just me being me, but with everyone else it was like I'm still (name) but there is something I can't tell you. And it's really weird especially in class if we talk about that topic because in my heart I want to stand up and say something, but I can't because I'm afraid of what might happen. And my mom works in the school system so that anything that goes on in the school could come back to her and I didn't want to mess up her reputation or anything. So I had to live like a double life...still do...

Why do you say you still do?

Because I'm not fully out...I'm only out with people I trust...my friends and my immediate family, but I guess with the majority of the population they don't know I'm out. They might think it, but I don't think they really know.

So how does it feel leading a double life, or how did it feel in high school and middle school especially?

I don't want to say it just sucked...but it was kind of unfair...going through life you just want to live your life the way you want to...you just want to be yourself, but you can't. You always have to hide a small part of you. And I mean it's part of life that you have to do that, but it's a major part of me, especially how some people treat it...it's painful...why do you hate queer people?...there's nothing wrong with us...there is nothing wrong with me.

Did you feel different for being gifted?

Well, yes and no...I felt different because in high school the IB program was kind of different from the rest of the high school, so I felt different. But I wasn't picked on or anything; it's just how it was. At the same time I felt like everybody else because when you're in the IB program, everybody else is in the IB program, so you're all the same. Then coming here to college I feel like everybody else...everybody else is gifted so it's cool.

Do you feel that people treated you differently for being queer?

## Interview 12: Monica

No, not really...if people didn't know I was queer, they treated me normally, and if they did know they'd treat me like regular (name), so...

So what strategies did you use to cope with having to hide part of yourself and feeling different?

I just told myself there were certain places where I could fully be myself, so if I was in class and I knew I couldn't say anything or voice my opinions or kind of just be out there, I would tell myself okay I can't do it now, but when I'm with my friends it'll be better...they won't mind if I said this, and stuff like that. And the same thing with my family, if I'm around mom or dad they wouldn't mind if I say certain things, but if I go to a family reunions where it's the whole family, I have to like put on this mask and just hide stuff. Basically there's appropriate times to do it and just let it all out when it's the right time.

Did you feel certain places in school were more welcoming, or was it just where your friends were? Like did you do extracurriculars or were there special classes...?

We had a GSA my senior year...but then it died afterwards which was kinda sad...but that was the only free space that any queer students could have. My high school's kinda weird...it has the atmosphere that if you're gay no one would really mind. You might find the occasional asshole, it's not that bad, but at the same time you couldn't really fully be out for anything because it's just not accepted. The school I came from is mostly black, and in the black community they try to pretend that it's non-existent, but at the same time we know about it. It's really weird. So GSA was pretty much the only safe place.

Did you go?

Yeah.

It was just your senior year?

Yeah. It was really sad...no one really cared about it afterwards.

Did you feel like your IB classes were more accepting than regular classes, or no?

Of my sexuality?

Or of people in general since they didn't necessarily know.

I think they were equally accepting and non-accepting, because I went to prom with my best friend...there was a lot of rumors and speculation that he was gay...and he was...and some people were kind of making fun of me because I was going to prom with a gay guy, or kind of making fun of him. My best friend was also my ex-boyfriend, but that was a whole other story. That really made me mad because he's my best friend and I'd rather go

## Interview 12: Monica

to prom with someone I can trust and someone I know I'm going to have a great time with, than with some guy that I pick up because I don't want to go to prom alone. And I had nothing against going to prom alone...I'd do it if my friend couldn't go. But that really made me mad because it was kind of unfair that they were picking on him and in a way picking on me because I was doing that.

Did you have any teachers that were particularly supportive?

Yeah, like the teachers who were part of GSA. One of the teachers in GSA, my friend and I always thought he was gay, and we still don't know but he was always really supportive. Otherwise I really don't know because I never asked...I never was out there. I have a feeling some teachers were though.

Were any of them particularly hostile towards queer people?

Not that I know of.

Did you do any other extra-curriculars?

In high school? I know I was in Key Club which is like Kiwanis. I was in National Honor Society. I was president of the Recycling Club. I was also in Anime Club. And...oh, I was in the Hampton Teen Center Youth Advisory Board...that was a major chunk of my time.

And what was that?

Basically we were starting a teen center, like a recreational center for teens, and we had to come up with ideas for events and how we wanted to set up the teen center...the design of the building...what kind of equipment we wanted inside...the kind of employees we wanted working there and stuff. I loved it.

Why? What did you love about it?

I just liked the idea of helping out with a project, and then later on, future generations will benefit from it. I never was able to go inside the teen center because I graduated right after it started, but I still follow it on Facebook and stuff, and I see all of the events they're having and it really makes me proud.

Did you use the internet either to look up things about queerness or find queer people?

Yeah, I used the internet to actually figure out the terms, like what is bisexuality? what is gay? what is pan-sexuality? and all that. I also used the internet to look up other examples of queer people who are famous or who have done stuff. The whole basis was that I wanted to know that I wasn't the only one, the only black pan-sexual or bi-sexual person. And I found out that, yeah, I'm not the only one. Other people are going through worse things or the same things or better things than me. I also learned a lot more about

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my community and like stuff we've gone through, because...I'm really upset...because in high school there was no such thing as gay history. The only thing you learn about gay history-wise is the Stonewall Riots, and I'm still kind of confused about that because I don't know the full thing. It's really frustrating because that's it, and it's really sad. If I wanted to know more about gay history, I had to look it up or I had to wait until Lambda where we have a Gay History week to find out.

Did you use the internet to find communities, or people, or just information?

Just information.

Can you think of any other coping strategies you used...positive or negative?

I would definitely say try to find someone who will accept you no matter what...has unconditional love for you. I was lucky to have parents who were right off the bat: "Well I love you anyways. I don't care." And I was lucky to have a group of friends in high school who were the same way too. Even if you can't find anyone in your immediate area, there's always hotlines and websites and stuff.

Do you feel that your gifted identity and your queer identity have interacted at all?

No, not really. I feel that they're like two separate things.

How are things different now that you are in college?

Well, gifted wise, I feel the same as everybody else. And sometimes I feel really stupid, due to the classes here...Oh my God! But being queer-wise, I feel more educated about the community, and I'm also more motivated to support the cause, to teach people that, hey, we're just like you. There's nothing wrong with us. Just because we want to be with a man or a woman doesn't mean we should be denied rights. I've also met a lot of awesome people here, too, so basically it's boosted my morale about being queer when I came here because I was really nervous when I first came here because I knew it was a prestigious school. So I really thought that the chances of me finding someone who would accept me for who I am would be really rare. Little did I know that just after going to the Over the Rainbow presentation and Lambda meetings I found out, oh my goodness, there's people here just like me...just as crazy and wacky...but as super-awesome as me. It was awesome!

Well the last question...hopefully the goal of this is to try to give teachers and schools strategies to use to make things better for middle schoolers and high schoolers...so what suggestions would you have either for teachers or for schools institutionally?

I would say stop or reduce bullying. If a teacher knows that a class or a group of students or a student is picking on another student because they think he is gay or too effeminate or too masculine, they need to go ahead and nip that in the bud. They need to say: "Hey,



## Interview 12: Monica

that's not cool; don't do that." It's not just the teachers. The student body must be motivated to put an end to it too, because I know students will listen to other students way more often than teachers.

So how would you suggest having the student body do that?

I remember from the Dan Savage thing when he came over to campus, he was saying that if a student was picked on, then make sure that a group of students goes over and says: "Hey, don't do that...that's not cool...what's wrong with you?" As more and more students say: "Hey, don't do that...knock it off" then more students will realize that this is wrong or not cool. It's just stupid. And then it comes to the point when the bullies aren't going to see the point of doing it. And if we're really lucky the bully will see that it was really wrong for me to do this in the first place.

Any other suggestions?

Just be supportive. I don't know how to say this, but just always know that you're always there for your students no matter what...no matter who they are. No one wants to be outed, but as long as a person knows they have a place they can come back to or someone they can talk to, that's good.

## Interview 13: Zack

When did you graduate from high school and how old are you?

2010; 20

How do you identify in terms of sexual orientation and gender identity?

I identify as transsexual and femmesexual, but it's complicated. Sometimes also as a lesbian, sometimes a man, usually genderqueer. Also genderqueer.

When did you first realize you were not straight?

The very first questioning was when I was twelve. I just started... I had things that made me wonder and then I just sort of spent my whole summer after sixth grade panicking and trying to imagine kissing women and seeing if I liked it, but I couldn't really tell because I didn't want to like it. I just couldn't tell, and I eventually just gave up and decided I was bisexual, and hoped that I would never meet a woman, that I would meet a man first. Yeah, that didn't work out. And then eventually it sort of faded away. I just stopped thinking about it and it became, "I sort of like women, it's not a big deal, it's a secret," and then it became sort of a joke secret in my head, and then when I was nineteen, about a year ago exactly, about this time last year, I started thinking about... I don't know, I was just sitting in my freshman lounge one day on the computer and saw something about Coming Out Day that I had written a year before, or months before, and I was thinking, "This is ridiculous. Why am I so supportive but I can't accept myself?" When I got to college, there were more women my age and women I hadn't grown up with, so they weren't these kids I had grown up with. They were real people my age. So I had new crushes that were women, and I was trying to pretend they weren't existing. I had a potential friend that I ended up sort of avoiding because I liked her and didn't want her to know it and didn't want to think about it either. One day we did orientation, they said support if you're not heterosexual, but I didn't want to. I didn't trust them. So I knew all that time, but I didn't want to think about it, and so one day I just decided, this is ridiculous to be an ally and not accept myself, and so maybe next Coming Out Day I'll tell people I'm bisexual. After that I wasn't going back as far as the closet with myself. Since then I've realized it's really just women, or just more feminine, sometimes feminine men or male-identified people, but generally just women. And then a couple months later I started questioning my gender identity, and I was thinking. I started wondering if I was transsexual and I can't remember exactly why, but I just started... I really don't remember what sparked that, but I thought, I'm going to imagine what it would be like to be male, and it felt better, and that scared me. So then I was kind of in denial about that, because I couldn't deal with that. I was scared. I looked up online "transsexual" and all the things were saying that the only way to treat it is to get a sex change, and I was like, "I can't handle that. I can't handle transitioning." I didn't really know what it was called then. But I was really scared, and so I kind of buried that away like, "That's not a real thing. I just would rather be male because I'm not comfortable being gay," or something like that, and I just sort of rationalized it away. And then at the beginning of this school year, when I was twenty, I joined the LGBT club, I joined

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Lambda, and I met more queer people. One of them just sort of said, "I'm like sixty percent female and forty percent male, and I thought "me too" and it just wasn't a big deal. That was the first time I was comfortable discussing that. And I'm friends with that person now. It just didn't seem so scary because they were genderqueer, and I was meeting more gendrequer people, and I thought, "there's that, and I don't want to say how much is male and female really because I know I've been suppressing it. And when I was identifying as straight, I thought I was bisexual, but as soon as I came out of the closet, I started to actually let myself have those feelings, I realized what I thought was attraction actually wasn't, in that way. It wasn't sexual attraction, and what I thought I was feeling for men wasn't really the same thing. So I was actually just women, but I thought it was both while I was in the closet and I started to feel like the more I explored the gender thing, I was like, no, this is going the same direction. It's just male. Then I realized I'm transsexual but I'm comfortable with the female gender, just not the female body, so that's why I would say I'm genderqueer, because some days I present male, but it's more for myself. It's not that I want people to see me as male, I just need to try to make my body more male for a day or so. So that second coming out to myself and coming out to other people, that was a few months ago.

Did you first come out to anyone as bi or gay before college?

No.

When did you first come out to someone else?

Last year. I told my bisexual friend because I knew she wouldn't judge me and then I started to tell everyone. I thought, I took seven years to come out to myself, I can't take the next seven year to come out to everyone else. So I literally told everyone in two weeks. Including my parents, which I was afraid of, but everything sort of worked out.

How did they react?

My mom was just shocked, because our family was going through a lot of stuff, and I think it was just another shock. You know, she wasn't expecting that, because I was always a very typical girly person. She wasn't as shocked about me being transsexual, which is weird. She didn't know how to feel about it. From a religious standpoint, she wasn't identifying as any religion at that point, but the ones she had been with in the past all didn't like homosexuality. She didn't know how she felt about it, so she's still sort of weird. She can talk about it and it's not a big deal now, she's supportive, but when I talk about "I'm going out with this girl tomorrow" or something she gets weird. Which is the same, pretty much how she reacted then. The idea of me actually being gay or sort of gay was upsetting. My father said he supported me, that he's supporting women to do whatever they're doing, including sexual orientation, but then he said basically that you won't know until you're with a woman sort of thing, and that's not true. He basically told me to sleep with a woman to find out. I was like, "That not's something I ever expected!" Because previously I wasn't really allowed to date in high school. I wasn't allowed to

## Interview 13: Zack

date guys, so I think my parents just expected me to end up married somehow, and then coming out, that plan's not going according to expectations.

How did all your friends react?

They were great. They were all really supportive. Even my more neutral... the close friends were supportive. Other people, one friend was just like, "Okay, thanks for telling me." It wasn't a big deal. And then the one who I know for religious reasons is against gay people or gay relationships or whatever, she was just, "You're still my friend, I'm not going to freak out about it." It was just like, okay, she didn't stop being my friend or get upset. I think she said, "I'm not going to get all upset about it." So that was better than I expected.

Were you identified as gifted in school?

Yes.

When was that?

First grade.

Did you have separate classes? What kind of services?

Once a week we'd go, and then twice or three times a week we'd go. In elementary through high school I did this, so it was either once or a few times a week we'd just go out of class and go to a program for an hour and a half or during a class period or something.

In middle school and high school did you have honors classes?

I did the IB program.

Was it a middle years program too in middle school?

Yes.

So mostly separate classes with other gifted kids?

Yes.

Did you feel you were different from your peers in high school for being queer?

Not for that...I mean I felt different...A lot of times I have felt creepy because I'm secretly a guy and people are going to see it. And because my gender is female but I'm still transsexual, a lot of times it just feels like everyone else is seeing a man and I have to

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prove that I'm a girl, and it's really strange like a female-bodied person trying to pass as a woman, and its is how I've been feeling...which is odd. It's always feeling that people are going to find out that I'm not right. So I guess I did, but I didn't think I'm different because I'm queer and people are going to find out. It was just...I'm different...I'm wrong, and creepy.

Did that start right away, like at twelve when you started to question?

I mean it probably started a long time before that...because I can go back and identify crushes that I had on girls younger than that, but I didn't realize that's what it was at the time.

Did you feel different from your peers for being gifted?

Yeah, but usually in a positive way. I was in class with other gifted kids, so...I guess in elementary school it felt more like a bad thing...well not a bad thing, because my parents were very supportive or whatever, but it just felt like other people didn't...I was never bullied or anything, but I always got the feeling that people didn't like me very much. They probably did...I was just paranoid.

So how did that make you feel, or did it get better in middle school when you had separate classes?

I tried to not care what those kids thought, because there were always other gifted kids around, so I spent time with them and they weren't judgmental. So I think I probably ended up looking down on those people who didn't like me.

Did you mostly hang out with other gifted kids?

Yeah, though I had a couple of friends throughout that time who were not part of any gifted program.

How was the school environment in general towards queer people?

I don't know what it was like in middle school. I don't think I was aware of it. I feel like middle school is this big problem of everything being uncomfortable for everybody. High school was good. There was GSA and I had friends in GSA. I didn't notice anyone being harassed. I didn't get the general feeling that everyone hates gay people here. We did Day of Silence...I don't know...I feel like the general environment was OK. There were probably people that got bullied, and I didn't notice because I wasn't friends with them, or I wasn't in the hallway when that was happening. I didn't get the overall feeling that there was a problem, but I wasn't identifying as queer at the time, so I probably didn't feel like it affected me as much as it did later.

Did you go to GSA?

## Interview 13: Zack

No, I was afraid to...

Why?

I wanted to be an ally, but I was afraid to be an ally because a lot of people would think I was gay, because I was and I didn't want to realize it. I also didn't join Lambda when I got to college because I was afraid. I didn't want to be associated with queer people because I think getting too close would make me have to look at myself, and I think I knew that on a below-the-surface level.

How would you say you coped with feeling different...feeling wrong, you said, wrong?

I just translated it into hating myself a lot. I would focus on other things, like I hated my weight or I hated my...I don't know...I had friends and that was helpful, but at the same time I felt like something was missing. On some level I think I probably thought I was better than other people, and eventually I got out of there and, I don't know...It's like I felt like was different because I was, if not smarter, more academic and...so I associated my strangeness with being gifted, or if it was negative, being fatter or other things. That particular issue, other than just feeling creepy, wasn't exactly on my mind a lot.

You said you were really girly. Why do you think that was?

Partly because I do like feminine things, society's prescribed gender role for feminine; part of it was over-compensating. I know I tried to be extra-girly to prove to myself...I wanted to fill that role...I wanted to perform my gender correctly, and be attractive. Also when I realized I was transsexual, I thought that all of it was over-compensation, but then as time has passed over the past few months, I've realized that, no, that a lot of that is just my personality, because I do like that stuff.

Do you feel like you over-compensated or tried to blend in in other ways?

I don't think so...also, I liked guys...I just didn't realize that what I felt for them wasn't a sexual attraction, it was an other kind of attraction. So if my friends were talking about boys, I could talk about boys. It was no big deal. I just tucked that part of myself away.

Do you think it was a positive, negative, or neutral thing that you "tucked that part of yourself away"?

Well, I feel like it was not good that I was repressed. I feel like being repressed, in general, is a bad thing. But I'm also glad I'm dealing...especially the trans thing...I'm so glad I'm dealing with this now, my sophomore year in college rather than in high school. I feel like that would have been hell. I don't know about sexual orientation, but I think this was a much better, healthier environment for me to come to terms with all that. Also having the separation from my parents...they're not around to constantly say anything

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negative about it. They don't see me as much so when they're around they're, you know...I told them over the phone because I just couldn't wait until I got home, so I didn't have to sit around and talk about it for weeks, and get whatever sort of attempted brainwashing would have happened. So it was probably a positive thing.

Did you feel like you had any particularly supportive or non-supportive teachers?

In terms of being LGBT? Or being gifted?

Socially...in general...

Yeah, I had an anthropology teacher that was very real...it was anthropology so those people tend to just have a better balance of understanding things in the world. They realize that this isn't the only society that exists. I felt like he understood...I don't know if he understood my particular issues, but I felt like he understood that the world is not everything people say it is, and that feels safer about the world. So I think in that way he was helpful.

Did you talk to him a lot, or just the way he acted in class?

Just the way he acted in class...I don't think I had anyone else in my high school or middle school that I had a more personal teacher-student relationship with.

What extracurriculars did you do?

I was in the drama club.

How was that?

That was great! That was the first time I met strange people, which was nice because I didn't have to be anything. First of all I met a lot of queer people, which was nice, because queer people in drama tend to be more out-there and more comfortable with themselves. It was a positive experience...making friends with people not in my classes...they were people I had things in common with and could have fun with and could work with.

Any other extracurricular stuff?

I don't remember...I probably went to a few club meetings for other things, but that was the main thing.

Okay...what about the internet? Did you use that to come to terms with yourself, or socially? You said in college you looked up trans stuff.

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Yeah, I looked up trans stuff...I looked up bisexual stuff...I looked up lesbian stuff...once I had gone through all these identities. I also found this website...I don't even remember what it's called now...but it had a bunch of forums and a chat room where I could talk to other bisexual women and that helped me get through a lot of stuff. Through posting things on that forum I got to empty out a lot of stuff that I had been hiding inside for a really long time. So that really helped me.

When did you first do that?

Probably last March or April.

So you didn't really look anything up prior to college?

I don't think so.

Do you feel like the social environment in general was better in your IB classes than in your regular classes?

Yeah, I felt very uncomfortable around people in my regular classes.

Why?

There was like a standing thing that they didn't like us. We felt neutrally about them. The kids in the other classes...they really didn't like us. Probably because of some privilege and there was. We were the kids who were definitely going to college. So...good colleges, good classes, and high GPA's...I don't know if it was so much, "You're the nerds," as it was, "You think you're special," which we probably did, so it wasn't entirely unwarranted.

So it was just more comfortable...

Yeah, I felt slightly unsafe because I just didn't know any of those kids... I hadn't been in any classes with them...and I guess...oh!...I just remembered...I was bullied a little in middle school, just by random people who made fun of me. I remember this one girl banging on the door in the bathroom, and me wanting to call her a lesbian, which is ridiculous now...I just want to go back and slap myself..

Why do you think that was?

I don't know. I think I was quiet and chubby and...different...and I just have always been aware of being "off," because I'm "off" in a lot of ways. I know being queer is a big part of that, but some of it was being smart or being overweight or being other things. It was also kind of easy to hide from that part of myself, feeling different, because I had a lot of other things that made me feel different.



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Why do think your instinct was to call her a lesbian?

Because I felt like...because I was in the bathroom and I felt like she was trying to open the door to bother me, and I was wondering why she would do that...and being upset...and feeling like that would upset her...like that would be a horrible insult. So I guess at that time I was fairly homophobic. I remember being afraid of lesbians and knowing why. Gay people are very supportive. Lesbians scared me, so I was literally homophobic.

Because why?

Because I knew that I was queer...

So you thought that they would like...

I mean, it was more like a feeling like I don't like you, but then I was aware that...I don't know...some weird irrational fear that if you're around other queer people, people will figure it out...or I'll figure it out...I'll actually have to think about it.

Do you feel like your gifted identity and your queer identity have interacted at all?

I know that being gifted has given me a privilege that has helped me cope with being queer, because I'm here in college and I feel like I know I'm going to make a meaningful contribution to the world, and I'm smart and I've been praised for that my whole life so it doesn't...if I'm queer that should make people think better of queer people and not think... Do you know what I mean? Like it's like I've already been promised that I'm worth something. I feel like if people hadn't been telling me, "you're smart, you're smart, you're smart," my whole life, I would have felt like, you know, with this identity everyone's going to hate me...I feel like with being gifted, I have the tools to make my life what I want it to be. If I chose to I could be quiet, get through school, make a lot of money, and no one would ever question me. So if I'm queer, I have something to fall back on. I'm in college...they're not going to kick me out of college because I'm queer. I'm going to have a degree. It's going to make it harder if I'm just trying to get minimum wage jobs; I don't know who I'm interviewing with and I don't have any particular reason I should be getting that job. I feel like I'd be struggling more in life...does that make any sense?

Anything to add? The last question then...hopefully this research can be used to give teachers things to do to make schools better. So what suggestions would you have for teachers or for schools institutionally?

Well, one thing is if you hear kids call each other something like "fag" you have to stop them. I know I have nephews and one of them was using that word and I was, "No, not in my house, you can't." I feel like they get away with that because it's just a common thing. My nephew is fourteen, so he's just about to go to high school, and do that, use that as a weapon to control other boys and to make gay people feel uncomfortable, and so, things like that. Don't let people get away with that! I feel like teachers should make a point,

## Interview 13: Zack

and I know parents get upset, “you’re not allowed to talk about gay people, you’re not allowed to support them,” but you should be allowed to support people not getting hurt! I feel like there should be more control over bullying and control over the way kids are taught to think. You can’t control everything, some people’s parents are always going to tell them bad things, like you shouldn’t like gay people. But I think having zero tolerance for harassment... and making it very clear that LGBT people can come to them for help. Because I’m sure... I mean, I’m sure my school is a pretty safe place, and I know a lot of teachers have the Safe Zone symbol in their doors and things like that, but I know there are lots of other places that there are teachers that wouldn’t have been good to talk to. I feel like educating teachers about the fact that this is a safety issue, and not about their personal opinions (you can’t change those). And just finding ways to... I would hope at some point kids would feel comfortable... letting kids know each other, find ways (without forcing them) to let kids understand and get to know each other better, so that... I have a friend who I’ve changed her opinion of queer people, which I didn’t know she had a negative one, and she knew me, and knows I am queer, and likes me and has realized “wait a minute, queer people aren’t doing something wrong.” If kids know each other, and then they find out they’re queer... It’s going to be hard to hate someone who’s already your friend. I wish I had answers. Providing an environment that’s more friendly... Schools make a big deal out of being on time, and not using your cell phone, and raising your hand and turning in your homework, and those things are important, but there should be more of an emphasis on being nice to each other. It’s not just about beating each other up and making threats, but also about being unkind.

Do you have any specific suggestions about how to let kids know each other better?

No.... I know whenever they tried to get us to bond together in school it didn’t work. ..Make it easier to start clubs, to join things... give kids an incentive to join clubs and meet other people. The GSA in my school wasn’t an official club, so I guess... they had their picture in the ad section of our yearbook because they weren’t an official club. They had a sponsor, and they met once a week, but I think they weren’t on the books an official club. The school should actively support the GSA or LGBT alliances, and be loud about it. I know that they’re always struggling on that line between parents and what’s right, and unfortunately those aren’t always the same.

You said, “Have more control over shutting down insults and bullying, but also more control over the way kids are taught to think.” Can you elaborate on that?

Include discussions on LGBT youths when discussing bullying or being kind to each other. We talk a lot about race, which is great, but we should also talk about the LGBT community. Make those comparisons, especially when people are young, because if you’re talking about queer people when kids are young... and you can talk to them about it without it being sexual, you can talk about straight couples without it being sexual... they can go their whole lives without it being shocking, they’re not going to care, they won’t hurt each other over it.